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THE FOLK BALLAD AS A GENRE

by

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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled The Folk Ballad as a Genre, submitted by S. L. Dragland in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



## ABSTRACT

This study of the English and Scottish popular ballads attempts to show how and why the ballad may be called a collective genre. Chapter One introduces the ballad by discussing its place in the history of English literature. Chapter Two analyses the "communal" theory of ballad origins, the most uncompromisingly "popular" thesis. Chapter Three tempers the communalists with other theories of origins, mostly "unpopular." The fourth chapter goes on to show that, origins aside, the ballad is made a collective thing by oral transmission. With some kind of collectivity established, Chapter Five investigates a possible ballad-ritual connection. Chapter Six shows that the group, not the individual "artist" is responsible for the poetry of the ballads.

This thesis holds that there are very few areas of balladry which are not illuminated by the collective, or popular, theory; and specifically that the particular contribution made to literature by the ballads is governed by their "popularity."





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## INTRODUCTION

Ever since the Romantic period, when scholars began to pay attention to the ballad in the effort to find out exactly what kind of a genre it was, a yet unresolved controversy has attended it. Who originated the ballad form, how they did so, and when it first appeared, are difficult questions for which there is as yet no satisfactory answer. There is, however, a very simple reason for all the uncertainty: the ballad is an oral and a "popular" genre. Ballads were transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth for centuries until they were finally "fixed" in print. And until ballads were written down, the responsibility for their preservation fell to unlettered people who were well qualified for the task, not because of any sophistication in literary matters, but because they participated in a creative folk tradition. They seem to have intuitively known how to present common human emotions in simple forms, and in a way which is still emotionally compelling.

The popular ballad is, as the great ballad scholar Francis J. Child says, "a distinct and very important Species of poetry."<sup>1</sup> This thesis attempts to show that much of what is distinctive and important about the ballad, as well as what is perplexing about it, is the result of its being an oral and collective genre.<sup>2</sup>

The problem which most ballad criticism has tried to solve is that of origins. Since the ballad was orally preserved until the



later stages of its history, there is a paucity of textual evidence indicating what the ballad might have been like in its fledgling days. As a result ballad critics are forced to study the ballad as it now exists, and to speculate about the kinds of influences which could have produced such a phenomenon. The diversity of the theories of origin shows how difficult is the problem with which scholars have been faced. There are theories of group authorship (communalism) and theories of individual (or minstrel) authorship. There are theories which see the ballad growing out of literary forms like the epic and the romance. And there are theories which suggest that the question is complicated by the possible influence of things like medieval religion and music (each ballad has a tune and is meant for singing). The first part of this thesis surveys the significant contributions to the study of ballad origins, and attempts to assign a relative importance to each.

The importance of origins cannot yet be resolved, however, and it may not be as important as it was once thought in determining what the ballad genre is like, because whatever the background of the ballad, it was probably moulded by the folk, whose possession it has been for so long, until it assumed its present shape and character. The ballad is a group phenomenon, a collective genre by virtue of the peculiar nature of its oral transmission, which probably had more to do with the formation of the ballad than its ultimate origin, whatever that was. The fourth chapter investigates the influence of tradition on the ballad, and the fifth tries





to relate the ballad and ritual, both of which seem to originate from the collective part of the human mind.

Oral transmission has clouded the question of origins, then, but it has also made of the ballad a collective genre, and, as such, it has been largely responsible for what the ballads are like as poetry. The final chapter explains ballad poetry in terms not of individual, but of collective creation. The fact that the individual has to do with the ballads only insofar as he participates in a group spirit, explains why the ballad differs in such significant and attractive ways from the literature of art. As oral poetry, for instance, the ballad is to some extent formulaic, though probably not so much as Anglo-Saxon poetry was. It has its standard ways of saying things (called commonplaces) which, along with the melody, helped the ballad singer to organize and remember his material. Both the commonplace and the refrain are aspects of the ballad which probably derive from its oral composition and preservation. The refrain likely allowed for group participation in the singing of the ballads. The ballad is, moreover, the property of a folk to whom life is something to be taken as it comes, and this objectivity is reflected in the impersonal and unbiased character of the ballad narrator, who invariably presents the story with little or no personal comment. Each ballad concentrates on one powerfully told crucial situation. The economy of narration for which the ballad is famous probably stems in part from the fact that the folk, like children, can visualize situations with a





minimum of explanation in the narrative. The best ballads are free from explanatory details which would be extraneous in view of the imaginative and often symbolic impact of these poems.

In short everything about the ballad, from its historical position to its literary merits, is illuminated by the fact that it is a genre in which the individual plays little part. It is this thesis which will be elaborated in the following pages.



## CHAPTER I

### THE REDISCOVERY OF THE BALLAD

The ballad flourished anonymously among simple people alongside a more conscious literature for centuries before the spirit of Romantic primitivism brought it to the attention of literary people who were just beginning to feel that a complicated and frustrating world was too much with them. But until the nineteenth century, with the odd exception, the ballad was pretty much taken for granted as a part of public tradition to which no particular significance need be attached. Such is the unstated attitude of people like Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, who mention and make use of ballads in their plays. Few who had any connection with literature gave the ballad the kind of recognition that it received from Sir Philip Sidney, though in passing, in his Apologie for Poetrie. "I never heard the olde song of Percy and Duglas," Sidney says, "that I found not my heart mooved more then with a Trumpet: and yet it is sung but by some blinde Crouder, with no rougher voyce, then rude stile."<sup>1</sup> Of course Sidney qualifies his appreciation by reflecting that the raw material represented by the ballad would be even more moving "trymmed in the gorgeous eloquence of Pindar."<sup>2</sup>

The ballads did play some part in seventeenth century English literary life, and they were apparently known by some





intellectuals as well as the common people. Samuel Pepys and Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, for instance, were stirred by an antiquarian interest to accumulate vast quantities of broadside ballads. And one of John Aubrey's anecdotes is about the poet, John Corbet, a Doctor of Divinity at this time, going to Abington on a market day: "The ballad singer complayned, he had no custome, he could not put off his ballads. The jolly doctor putts of his gowne, and putts on the ballad singer's leathern jacket, and being a handsome man, and had a full rare voice, he presently vended a great many, and had a great audience."<sup>3</sup>

Though the ballad found its way into some poetical miscellanies in the period between Sidney and Addison (such as Wit and Mirth, or Pills to Purge Melancholy), the mention it received was on the whole disparaging, and there was not in Britain until much later, as there was in Denmark, an actual collection of ballads like Vedel's It Hundrede U Duualde Danske Viser (1591). A period like the eighteenth century, in which the poetry of Dryden and Pope flourished, was not likely to appreciate the humble ballad, let alone to consider it worthy of criticism and collection, as the Danes had done. And even by the time that Addison wrote his Chevy-Chase papers, a signal event in ballad criticism, the ballads had received very little real notice.

Looking back at Addison's Chevy-Chase "Critick," we may be inclined to dismiss it as an example of typically Neoclassical



criticism. As Edmund Broadus points out, Addison's criticism involves two dissimilar modes of approach.<sup>4</sup> In the first place he holds that poetry must be assessed by its truth to nature and its simplicity rather than by conformity to the rules laid down by "the greatest Modern Critics."<sup>5</sup> Addison's critical ground is clearly rather shaky. Still, though he appeals to the ancients by ingeniously finding classical antecedents for "Chevy-Chase," and though he attempts to appease the moderns by finding a moral in the conventional "tag" ending, Addison's criticism was contrary to the general stream of opinion of his time. Nor were those who ran in this stream hesitant to attack him. One of Addison's most bitter opponents was John Dennis (Original Letters, Familiar, Moral, and Critical. London: 1721). That the likes of Dennis were not to sway him Addison showed by later coming out with reflections on the merits of "the old ballad of the Two Children in the Wood." However, he now provoked a clever parody by Dr. William Wagstaffe, Comment Upon the History of Tom Thumb, and this bit of satire seems to have hit the mark, for in the reprint of the Spectator several expressions in the essay on "The Two Children in the Wood" are altered, and a particularly questionable comparison of its author to Virgil is omitted altogether.

Addison was placed on the defensive by the literary taste of his time, which is well documented by another literary figure who did not share it. The dramatist Nicholas Rowe, whose play, Jane Shore, was based on a ballad, defied current taste in his pro-





logue:

Let no nice Sir despise our hapless Dame,  
Because recording Ballads chaunt her name;  
Those venerable ancient Song-Enditers  
Soared many a Pitch above our modern Writers; . . .  
Their words no Shuffling, Double-Meaning knew,  
Their Speech was homely, but their Hearts were true.<sup>6</sup>

The first sign that ballad-appreciation was changing is the historically important A Collection of Old Ballads (1725) attributed to Ambrose Phillips. This collection first offered ballads to the public to read. That the public was interested is indicated by the fact that a third edition was in progress in 1727.<sup>7</sup> Ramsay's Evergreen (1724) and Tea-Table Miscellany (four vols. 1724 to 1732), in a decidedly Scottish national tone, followed closely.

By the mid-eighteenth century popular poetry was beginning to gain its share of literary interest so that, if there was yet no strenuous movement in its favour, there was apparently little opposition. The following outraged condemnation of ballad singing, from the London Magazine for March 1735, is exceptional: "The scandalous practise of ballad singing is a continual nursery for Idlers, Whores, and Pick-Pockets; a School for Scandal, Smut and Debauchery. . . and ought to be entirely suppressed; or at least reduced to proper restrictions."<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, ballads were finally being accepted on their own terms, as evidenced by this perceptive statement by the poet Gray (about "Child Maurice" 83).<sup>9</sup> "It is divine. . . . Aristotle's best rules are observed in it in a manner which shews that the author never heard of Aristotle. It begins in the fifth act



of the play. You may read it two thirds through without guessing what it is about; and yet, when you come to the end, it is impossible not to understand the whole story."<sup>10</sup>

It is not altogether surprising, then, to learn about Bishop Percy's interest in the ballad. The so-called Percy folio, one of the most important discoveries in the history of the ballad, was accidentally found by Percy under a bureau in the house of a friend, Sir Humphrey Pitt, where it was being used by the servants to light the fire. From this invaluable manuscript, and other sources, Percy compiled his Reliques of Ancient Poetry (1765), a collection which was to be of incalculable influence in the Romantic movement, particularly in Germany.

Though Percy's contribution to balladry was monumental, his editorial attitude was not one which modern scholarship endorses. His folio contained many partial texts and he was not above completing them, adding stanzas of his own, and polishing stanzas which he thought were poetically questionable. Some correspondence between Percy and the poet Shenstone shows what happened to the "rough" poems Percy received. Shenstone sends Percy the following lines from "Gil Morice" for assessment:

His hair was like the threeds of gold  
Shot frae the burning Sun,  
His lips like roses dropping dew,  
His breath was a perfume.

Percy's reply suggests the method of "improvement" he was to use:

"I can think of no rhyme for sun, in the 14th stanza of the addi-





tions to Gill Morrice--but what if you find one for perfume  
lin ult. Query? threads of gold drawn from Minerva's loom--  
 or something infinitely better."<sup>11</sup> Though the stanza in question  
 could perhaps do with some improvement, one wonders if the best  
 way to do it was to add a learned classical allusion.

It is easy enough to criticize Percy, like Addison, from  
 the standpoint of modern knowledge, but our two centuries remove  
 from Percy's time should make us more tolerant of what he did,  
 especially in view of the importance of his contribution. It was  
 difficult for Percy's contemporary, Joseph Ritson, to achieve such  
 objectivity. As a ballad collector motivated by a passion for anti-  
 quarianism, Ritson considered fidelity to his received text of prime  
 importance, and he became the first to lay down critical principles  
 approaching those of modern editors. Though Ritson was mainly en-  
 gaged in criticising others, like Percy, whose methods differed  
 from his own, the preface to his Select Collection of English Songs  
 (1783, followed by Ancient Songs in 1790) clearly enunciates the  
 distinction between the lyric and the narrative song in a manner  
 which is as amusing for its tortuousness as it is historically in-  
 teresting:

It may not be impertinent to premise that, as the collection, under  
 the general title of Songs, consists not only of pieces strictly and  
 properly so called, but likewise, though in great disproportion as  
 to number of Ballads or mere narrative compositions, the word Song  
 will, in the course of this preface, be almost everywhere used in its  
 confined sense; inclusive, however, of a few modern and sentimental  
 ballads, which no reader of taste, it is believed, will be inclined  
 to think out of place.<sup>12</sup>



Ritson also disagreed with Percy's belief that the ballads were composed by minstrels. Though he suggests no significant alternative, he is adamant in denying that minstrels were even remotely associated with the ballad: "That there did exist in this country," he says, "an order of men called minstrels is certain; but then it is equally clear that the word was never used by any English writer for 'one who united the arts of poetry and music, and sung verses to the harp of his own composing,' . . . but, on the contrary, that it ever implied an instrumental performer, and generally a fidler, or such like base musician."<sup>13</sup>

Of the other early collectors, David Herd (Ancient and Modern Scots Songs, Heroic Ballads. 1769) stands out for his genuine appreciation of the old songs. In his two volume edition of 1776 Herd promises not "to reduce the language to the orthography of the times in which the several pieces may be supposed to have been written."<sup>14</sup> Pinkerton's Scottish Ballads (1783), and Johnson's Scots Musical Museum (1787 to 1803) were two other important collections which preceded Sir Walter Scott's Border Minstrelsy (1801). Scott's publication, which is particularly valuable for its preservation of border ballads, had a greater immediate influence in England than had Percy's work. Like Percy, though, Scott was a writer and a poet, and he liked to "improve" the ballads he included in his collection.<sup>15</sup> Scott took an intermediate position in the minstrel controversy, feeling that Percy had given the minstrel too much, and Ritson too little.





Though the day of Percy, Ritson, and the other early editors was an important period for the collecting of ballads, collection was accompanied by little significant criticism. The differentiation of ballad from song was accomplished, but other than that most "criticism" consisted of bickering over the claims of the minstrel. In fact the first great critical theory of ballad origins had to come from Germany, where Percy's Reliques had had such an electrical effect on the early Romantic writers of that country. It is perhaps not unusual that the same feeling which stimulated Gottfried Bürger's literary ballad, "Lenore," and Johann Herder's collection of volkslieder, should have led to a romantic view of ballad origins. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm originated this theory--communalism--by saying das volk dichtet, that "the folk," not individuals, were responsible for the creation of the form. Beyond hinting at a mysterious process of group creation, of course, the Grimms did not go. They left their theory where many subsequent critics thought it belonged, in the depths of mystery.

The communal theory of group composition was to gain considerable currency among ballad scholars, but there always was a rival theory which traced the ballad to individuals, usually minstrels. A. W. Schlegel, the German poet and critic, was perhaps the first to decide that, no matter what happens to a ballad in the oral tradition, only an individual can be responsible for the



original composition. The work of art, he felt, implies the artist. Schlegel's individual authorship theory never gained the degree of unqualified support that communalism was to receive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because by the time communalism had ceased to be fashionable, critics realized that the matter of ballad origins was too complex to be simply traced either to a group, or to an individual.

The communal theory gained much impetus from later nineteenth century discoveries in the field of folklore (discoveries of which, by the way, modern anthropologists are a little ashamed).<sup>16</sup> Andrew Lang, one of the anthropological school of folklorists appears to have been the first (in 1875) to develop a communal theory; but it was in America that the "communalist" position first began to receive significant support. Early statements of communalism are relatively easily dismissed, but later American critics like Francis B. Gummere and G. L. Kittredge place it on a stronger base of scholarship.





## CHAPTER II

### THE COMMUNAL THEORY OF BALLAD ORIGINS

The communal theory of ballad origins, as it was stated by Francis Gummere, suggested that poetry could be spontaneously created by a group. The people most likely to succeed with extemporaneous ballad-making are those who share similar thoughts and emotions, and this requirement is most satisfactorily fulfilled by communally oriented primitive peoples. Since the ballads contain survivals of primitive beliefs, early critics were tempted to attribute considerable antiquity to them. Does the ballad have its roots in the ancient past? Clearly it does insofar as it is a branch of the literary tree. But the tendency among communalists like Gummere was to believe that the ballad developed into its present form directly from beginnings in a very remote time. These critics ignored the signs which could have warned them to be suspicious, as we now are, of such a conclusion. These signs are found in historical evidence which fails to date the ballad genre any earlier than the Norman Conquest.

Now it may not be necessary to believe that the ballad is an ancient form for one to adopt the communal theory. Perhaps the right conditions for group creation existed in the Middle Ages. But one of the things which should be done at the outset of a study of communalism, is to qualify its primitivistic connotations in a



way which firmly establishes the ballad as a medieval genre. It is in this context that comunalism, and any other theory of origins, must be studied, since there are very good reasons for assuming that the ballad is medieval in origin.

These reasons may be arranged into three categories of historical evidence bearing on the date of composition of the ballads. The first and most straightforward category is that of textual or manuscript survivals. The second includes the internal signs of age to be found in certain historical ballads, some of which may be dated by the events to which they refer. Finally, there is the external evidence of references to ballads in chronicles, and of forms analogous to the ballad (such as the medieval lyric), which can be dated with some certainty.

There are not many ballads in manuscripts or printed texts older than 1600, though the earliest, "Judas" (23), is found in a manuscript almost certainly of the thirteenth century. Another piece, "A Ballad of the Twelfth Day," is found in the same manuscript as "Judas," but it does not qualify as a ballad because of its monorhyme couplets.<sup>1</sup> "Judas" has never been found in oral tradition, nor is its structure, that of couplets of six-stressed lines, found in any other ballad, but it has the dramatic and stylistic requirements which qualify it as a ballad.<sup>2</sup> "Riddles Wisely Expounded" (1), which has a genuine and primitive motif (a maiden outwits a supernatural being by the power of the word), is found much





later in the Rawlinson MS. (c. 1450). Slightly later are "Robin Hood and the Monk" (119), "St. Stephen and Herod" (22), and "Robyn and Gandeley" (115). From about 1500 we have "Robin Hood and the Potter" (121) and "Crow and Pie" (111). Fifty years later appears the manuscript containing "The Battle of Otterburn" (161), "The Hunting of the Cheviot" (162), "Sir Andrew Barton" (167), and "Captain Car" (178). Textual evidence of which we may be certain, then, indicates that the ballad may be as old as the thirteenth century.

The internal evidence to be found in historical ballads containing names and references to events which can be placed with some degree of certainty, is not very dependable, particularly because, comparatively speaking, Britain has a mediocre stock of historical ballads. "Queen Elanor's Confession" (156) and "Sir Hugh" (155) are thought to be early ballads because they pertain to personages of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries respectively. However, the former is based on a common folklore motif found also in one of Boccaccio's tales and may be of literary origin. The latter is a religious legend associated with Hugh of Lincoln, who was said to have been murdered by the Jews in 1255. But the anti-Semitic motif was a common one--Chaucer used it in his Prioress' Tale--and there is no reason to connect it with a definite event.

"Sir Patrick Spens" (58) may be based on any one of three historical sea voyages, two of which were of the late thirteenth





century. In 1281 Margaret, the daughter of Alexander III of Scotland, was married to the King of Norway, and she was escorted to Norway by a number of Scots lords, many of whom were drowned on the return voyage. Her daughter, the Maid of Norway, became heir to the Scots throne in 1285. She also died on the voyage to Scotland in a storm according to one account. No one with a name like Patrick Spens is historically connected with either of these events, but a Patrick Vans does figure in a third voyage: the one undertaken for James VI of Scotland in 1589 to bring his bride from Denmark. The ballad could describe this voyage equally well.<sup>3</sup> However, since the ballad first appears in the eighteenth century and contains nothing to say when its disaster occurred, the evidence seems too conjectural to allow us to connect the ballads with any of the above events.

The Aberdeenshire "Battle of Harlaw" (163) gives a reasonably secure date. The event occurred in 1411 and, says William J. Entwistle, "was of immediate local interest to the Aberdonians. The ballad is of the sort which arises directly out of the experience it narrates, and we are, in any case, certain that it existed in 1549."<sup>4</sup>

Alexander Keith sums up the historical references of the Child ballads: "In Child's collection, excluding the Robin Hood group and some late chapbook and broadside doggerel, there are sixty-nine ballads dealing with actual personages or historical



occurrences. Of these, thirteen refer to pre-1500 events and persons, the subjects of six lie between 1500 and 1550, and only one or two of the remaining fifty are later than the period 1550-1700."<sup>5</sup> Keith concludes:

Before 1500 the art of making and singing ballads was only coming into fashion, and . . . the "golden age" of the ballad commenced after that date, and lasted through the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> Professor Kittredge pleads that many medieval ballads must have been lost, by accident or for want of collectors; but it is curious that the ardent antiquarians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could not recover more than a handful of specimens 200-300 years old when in the beginning of the twentieth century, with traditional minstrelsy fallen into decay, Scottish collectors could find many versions of ballads concerned with events of three hundred years ago.<sup>7</sup>

It may be that Keith endows the "ardent antiquarians" with more scholarly methods than they possessed, but he is probably right not to see the ballad as an early genre.<sup>8</sup>

Some more light, though of a very dim variety, may be shed on the problem by one kind of external evidence, that of chronicles and other records. An important piece of evidence in the dating of the ballads is the testimony of William of Malmesbury. The chronicler states that a poem about Canute's daughter Gunnhild, who was falsely accused by one Roddyngar and unexpectedly delivered by one Mimicon, was nostris adhuc etiam in triviis cantitata (c. 1140). It has been thought that this twelfth century reference is to the ballad of "Sir Aldingar" (59). However, Sir E. K. Chambers has little use for this assumption. "Surely there could be no more gratuitous hypothesis [he says] than an assumption that a poem which, like 'Sir Aldingar', comes to us from the Percy MS. of about 1650 can be identical in





style with one known to William of Malmesbury in the twelfth century."<sup>9</sup> Chambers is not the only one to be skeptical about Malmesbury's "Sir Aldingar." M. J. C. Hodgart notes that the story is a well-known piece of folklore, a variant of the motif of the accused queen, and need not be historical at all.<sup>10</sup>

An interesting illustration of the difficulty of dating by external evidence may be provided by the Robin Hood ballads. Though critics as distinguished as Professor Entwhistle seem to have accepted Robin Hood's historicity without question, the actual record reads with some confusion. The "B" text of Piers Plowman, dated at about 1377, for example, mentions that Sloth knew "rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf erle of Chestre." Professor Bruce Dickins has noted a fragment in a hand of about 1400 scribbled in a Lincoln Cathedral MS., that looks like the beginning of a ballad:

Robyn hod in scherewod stod  
hodud and hathud hosut and schod  
ffour and thurti arowus he bar  
in his hondus.<sup>11</sup>

As Hodgart states, however, the only real evidence for Robin Hood's existence at an early date is the testimony of one Martin Parker, a seventeenth century writer,<sup>12</sup> who can hardly be taken seriously. In his "True Tale of Robin Hood" he writes that Robin Hood was really the Earl of Huntingdon and died in 1198. He quotes Robin's supposed epitaph:





Robert, Earle of Huntingdon  
 Lies under this little stone.  
 No archer like him was so good:  
 His wildness named him Robyn Hood.  
 Full thirteen yeares, and something more,  
 These northerne parts he vexed sore.  
 Such outlaws as he and his men  
 May England never know agen.

The name Robin Hood has also been discovered in several medieval documents. Child mentions that a Thomas Robinhood was one of six witnesses to a grant of 1380 or 1381.<sup>13</sup> Sir E. K. Chambers records five references: names like Robin Hood appear in Sussex in 1296, in Wakefield from 1316 to 1335, at court in 1324, in Sussex again in 1332; and he thinks it very likely that "the story of the outlaw took its start from a Robin Hood who in 1354 was in prison awaiting his trial for vert and venison in the Forest of Rockingham in Northants."<sup>14</sup> Professor Dickins has pointed out two further references: a Robertus Hood fugitivus is mentioned in the Great Roll of the Pipe for 1230, and the Monk Bretton Cartulary for 1332 refers to the "stone of Robin Hood." This fairly frequent occurrence of the name of the outlaw is of little use in dating the ballads, however, and the ballads provide no proof that Robin Hood even was a historical figure. Robin Hood seems to have been a fairly common name, and may even have been used generically for outlaws in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup>

In a second kind of external evidence, it can be shown that forms approaching that of the ballad did exist earlier than the thirteenth century. An important piece of evidence towards



establishing this fact occurs in an offshoot of the famous St. Vitus Dance legend. Apparently the pilgrim Theodoric, who was one of the cursed dancers, made his way into England and was cured at the shrine of St. Edith. His account of what happened to the dancers included the song with which they accompanied themselves before they were cursed. We have part of it:

Equitabat Bouo      per silvam frondosam;  
Ducebat sibi      Mersuindem formosam:  
Quid stamus?      Cur non imus?

Scholars are not sure of the origin of this fragment, but they do have manuscript evidence for the names (Bovo and Merswinde) from the eleventh century, and for the verses from the twelfth. "Equitabat Bovo" is a carole<sup>16</sup> and not a narrative piece, though it presents the situation in much the same manner as a ballad would, but it attests at least to two things: first that the couplet with a lilting movement was in existence in the twelfth century, and secondly that it was used with a refrain (and a refrain containing references to the dance like those of the Danish ballads). With the help of "Equitabat Bovo" it might be possible to push the date of origin of ballads back a century, though it would be on slender evidence.

A similar song, recorded by a twelfth century chronicler of Ely, was supposedly written by Canute who, hearing the monks in the monastery singing, composed a cantilena, or song, which began as follows:





Merie sungen the muneches binnen Ely,  
 Tha Cnut ching rew ther by.  
 'Roweth, cnihtes, noer the land,  
 And here we these muneches sang.'

(One way or another, Canute and his family figure rather strongly in ballad history.) Again, the song need not have been a narrative to establish that the four beat couplet with a ballad-like swing was probably used as early as the eleventh century. Hodgart, however, who denies that the ballad is anything more than "a development of the late Middle Ages," assesses Canute's song thus: "[It] shows that [by the twelfth century] a break had been made with the Anglo-Saxon tradition, and that there had been a shift to a new verse-form of non-English origin. The song does not prove that the genre of the ballads rests on verse forms which had been current since the twelfth century."<sup>17</sup>

Some critics are willing to pinpoint the "break" Hodgart mentions as caused by the Norman Conquest: "In the Teutonic languages," says W. P. Ker, "the first appearance of the new rhyming measures can be roughly dated; they can hardly be older than the eleventh century."<sup>18</sup> Miss Pound agrees: "The terminus a quo for ballad origins must be the beginning of the twelfth century. Ballads of the rhyming form of the English and Scottish type cannot in origin antedate the Norman Conquest."<sup>19</sup>

It has been seen that, on the evidence of the ballads alone, it is impossible to suppose that ballads were created any sooner than the thirteenth century, and, on questionable external evidence





referring to "Sir Aldingar," than the twelfth century. "Equibat Bovo" and Canute's song, which resemble the ballads in some ways, may date from the eleventh century, but this is the very earliest, as far as is known, that anything like the ballads existed in England.<sup>20</sup>

Since the ballad is for all practical purposes a medieval genre, the theory of communal origins must stand or fall on the support it receives from the Middle Ages. The communalist must demonstrate, for instance, that there existed in the Middle Ages a collective condition of living which psychologically and physically fulfilled the requirements of communal composition. Then he must show that poetry may be spontaneously created by a group, usually in the dance, which the communalists have considered the ideal creative situation. These two basic assumptions of the communalist will now be discussed, as sympathetically as possible.

Gummere's communalism presupposes a people much closer to the primitive than to the modern, among whom the physical and emotional bond between most members of the society is strong enough to encourage group endeavors and, perhaps, to permit group composition of songs. Though there are conflicting opinions about the likelihood of the existence of a so-called "ballad country" inhabited by a collective "ballad people," the consensus seems to be that the medieval society in which the ballads probably appeared was considerably more uniform than fragmented or specialized, and



that this factor may very well have been important in ballad composition. G. G. Coulton, the medieval historian, makes the following distinction between the average medieval and modern man:

The medieval labourer did in some ways grapple more directly with nature, and at his actual work (as apart from his leisure) was less tempted to look upon himself as a mere cogwheel than the modern operative. This, however, is often exaggerated beyond all reason by modern writers; and even so far as it is true, we must counter balance it by the consideration that the modern wage-earner, when not at work, has the run of a far wider world, both physically and intellectually, that was closed to his forefathers. The sociologist Durkheim has pointed out that, in spite of many things which still remain to be remedied in the modern worker's lot, he has more originality of mind than the noble savage. If we take a hundred of these latter at random, we shall find great uniformity of taste; what one likes, all like, what one dislikes, all dislike.<sup>21</sup>

G. H. Gerould, whose masterful study of the ballad is, as yet, the last word in ballad studies, does not feel that there was in Britain so complete "a community of interests" as Axel Olrik found in Denmark, but he admits that "the manors and villages of England had a stable and homogeneous population, among whom those higher in station may well have participated as a matter of course in the pleasures of their dependents, and indeed have contributed very notably to the arts of song and dance that were their common property."<sup>22</sup> The probable situation is a little more imaginatively visualized in the following passage:

The suggestion that the traditional ballad grew up in a homogeneous agricultural and feudal environment in which most of its stories are set is likely for a variety of reasons. In the villages opportunities for communal gatherings, as fairs, harvest festivals, sheep







shearing and spinning on long winter nights provided scope for the professional or amateur reciter to entertain the community with verse narratives based on literary sources, on commonly held beliefs, or on incidents of a dramatic nature relating to their district or a neighboring one. The social cleavage between villager and squire or laird was not so marked in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance period as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, certainly not in Scotland, and the entertainment of the laird and his lady consisted frequently enough in the singing or hearing of the same ballads that delighted the village.<sup>23</sup>

Although more descriptive of individual performance of ballads, the passage does describe the homogeneity of attitude and interest which would be necessary for group composition.

Even literary evidence, as in the following differentiation of ballad themes from epic themes, suggests the uniformity and insularity of "ballad peoples": "The traditional epic has a national scope and its heroes are the leaders of the nation. Its inspiration comes from large movements of the folk: the Barbarian irruptions, the Viking Raids, the Crusades and pilgrimages, the defense of Anatolia against the Turk. The ballads are concerned with small settled communities, local heroes, raids and excitements of no more than episodic value in the nation's history."<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore:

[The ballads] are attached to particular places: Branhholm, the Sherwood Forest, Anteguera, Kiev, Senj, etc. Despite all the activity displayed in the ballads, they relate no great movements of peoples; nothing like the Germanic Migrations, the settlement of Iceland, or the Crusades. The numbers involved may not have been greater than those of ballad poetry, but the scale of their actions corresponds to epos or saga, not to ballads. Nationality is too big a concept for people so tribally organized. One encounters instead simple antitheses which explain the recurrence of the same sort of action in ballad after ballad.<sup>25</sup>



Lest the preceding opinions about a homogeneous ballad environment suggest that all critics are in agreement about it, it is only fair to allow that there are objections to the idea, like that of Louise Pound, who says:

There was no period when in a common atmosphere of ignorance, so far as book-lore is concerned, one habit of thought and one standard of action animated every member from prince to plough-boy. Try to imagine Jack Straw's "menye" ruled by the same habit of thought as Chaucer's squire, or Froissart's Jacquerie by the same standard as Froissart himself. Chaucer knows his contemporary society too well to place the same quality of matter in the mouths of his higher and his lower characters.<sup>26</sup>

Miss Pound's point is valuable in that it implicitly calls for a specific designation of ballad country. Obviously some parts of Britain were culturally more advanced than others, even in the Middle Ages, and it is in "cultural" surroundings that the ballad does not flourish. Miss Pound herself helps to clear up the problem by noticing the "general superiority of ballads coming from the 'North countrie'", and it is well to observe that the border country--not the sophisticated London of Chaucer--is generally regarded as "ballad country" par excellence. As John E. Housman tells us, "the situation in England suggests that the greater political stability and the more rapid growth of mercantile and industrial enterprise south of the border did not offer traditional balladry as much scope as the essentially feudal and agricultural situation in the north."<sup>27</sup> The south of England we should expect to be like France and Italy, two lands of intense medieval culture, which have relatively little traditional poetry.





Though it would probably be impossible to discover a complete homogeneity of feeling and activity in the most primitive society imaginable, the evidence indicates that medieval Britain, or part of it, was a much more uniform environment than Miss Pound would believe. It seems that in certain areas social uniformity was the rule for almost all levels of society, though if it could be proven that ballad making was an exclusively lower class pursuit, it would only be necessary to discover homogeneity within that section of society. In any case, the assumption that there was in medieval times and earlier a "community of ideas" of a sort among people who probably composed ballads, would seem to be reasonable. And this is the sort of environment in which communal composition could conceivably take place, if it ever takes place.

From the over-all environment in which the ballad was probably composed, medieval Britain, we now turn to its more specific environment, the dance, which is held by communalists to have facilitated group creation. Since the communal theory holds that the dance would be the ideal forming influence on the ballad, it is important to determine as exactly as possible what was the relationship of the ballad to the dance. Evidence suggests that the two were more interdependent than many critics, especially Miss Pound, have thought.

Dancing was one of the principal recreational activities of the Middle Ages. People danced in rings, and in rows, and they seem to have accompanied themselves with what have since been called





"dance songs." There was apparently a song-leader, an individual who would sing part of a given stanza himself, while all the other dancers marked time. The movement of the dance took place when everyone sang the refrain, and the chorus. Now in medieval lyrics and ballads there are many different relationships between the song proper, that is, the variable element in each stanza, and refrain and chorus, which all may sing because they do not change. The lyric carol, for instance, is noted for its initial and external burden (or chorus), and a refrain consisting of a repeated last line of the stanza.<sup>28</sup> The ballad, on the other hand, generally has an internal refrain (comprising the second and fourth lines of the stanza which contain it), though it may have a burden resembling that of the carol. And there are many other forms which vary in this or that particular from the two just mentioned.

That many of these forms of song, including the carol, were used in the dance is not a disputed point. But many critics, including Miss Pound, have disputed the claim of the ballad to be a dance song. This opinion must be investigated in terms of various kinds of dance songs and their relationship to ballads, and in terms of the refrain which probably owes its presence in songs to the requirements of the dance if the two forms are related.

Some interesting, though perhaps inconclusive, evidence which may be interpreted as showing that ballads were danced, is the Complaynt of Scotland (1549) which contains lists of songs and dances. Among thirty-six songs mentioned are "Pastance with gude



company," "The frog cam to the myl dur," "The battel of the hayrlau," "The hunttis of cheuet" and "The perssee and the mon-gumrye met." The last three are probably ballads. A list of thirty dance pieces includes ballad titles like "Robene hude," "Thom of lyn," and "Ihonne Ermistrangis daunse" among such typical dance songs as "The hunt is up," "Al cristyn mennis daunse," and "The alman haye." Though others<sup>29</sup> believe that "Robin Hood," "Tam Lin," and "Johnny Armstrong" are ballads, Miss Pound recognizes only the <sup>last</sup> ~~latter~~ as a possible ballad-dance song.

Miss Pound feels that

when peasant throngs, as over against aristocrats, danced in feudal times, they did not dance. . .to pieces of the lyric-epic type just mentioned [ballads]. Nor as a general thing, the rule rather than the exception, did they dance to their own improvisations. It is more likely that they danced to current inherited songs, appropriate for dance purposes, with, possibly enough, a bygone vogue in higher circles behind them; that is, if we keep the analogies of existent dance songs before us.<sup>30</sup>

In Poetic Origins and the Ballad Miss Pound quotes many of these "existent dance songs," such as the song with which the Scots celebrated their victory at Bannockburn:

Maydens of Engelande, sore may ye morne,  
For your lemmans ye have loste at Bannockisborne!  
With a heve a lowe  
What wenyth the Kynge of Engelande  
So soone to have wonne Scotlonde:  
With a rumby lowe.<sup>31</sup>

or one of the conventional holly-ivy songs:

Holi with his mery men they  
can daunce in hall;  
Ivy & her ientyll women can  
not daunce at all,





But like a meyne of bullokes  
 in a waterfall  
 Or on a whot somer's day  
 Whan they be mad all.

Nay, nay ive, it may not be,  
 iwis;  
 For holy must haue the mastery,  
 as the maner is.<sup>32</sup>

or a children's play-party game song of a kind which has been generally agreed to have descended from the Middle Ages, this one containing internal evidence of the dance:

Oats and beans and barley grow!  
 Oats and beans and barley grow!  
 Do you or I or anyone know  
 How oats and beans and barley grow?  
 First the farmer sows his seed,  
 Then he stands and takes his ease,  
Stamps his foot, and claps his hands,  
 Then turns around to view the land  
 Waiting for a partner, waiting for a partner  
 Open the ring and take one in.<sup>33</sup>

Miss Pound allows that these songs (and many more) were clearly used in the dance. But the fact that they lack narrative qualities she takes as evidence that the ballads were not similarly used.

Repetition and interweaving of lines [she says] is much more pervasive and essential in communal dance songs than in pieces of the Child type, and it is of a different kind. . . . The Child ballads . . . show something quite different from the dance songs. For them the refrain is the variable element. . . . It is a safer hypothesis that the Child type of piece, once established in popularity, might at times be fitted to well-known dance tunes, or be utilized, like nearly any other kind of song, as a dance song, than that dance genesis evolved the Child type--that the Child type represents par excellence among poetic types, an evolution from dance origins<sup>34</sup>

An interesting thing about this statement is Miss Pound's reference to "communal dance songs," which suggests both that, in her opinion, songs have been communally composed, and that the composition took



place in the dance. This may be a damaging admission for so strong an apostle of individual authorship as Miss Pound, but two other things about her statement--the divorce of ballad text from ballad tune, and the conception of refrain as variable--are very questionable.

Miss Pound's suggestion that a Child ballad would have been fitted to a dance tune after its production, rather than during the process, involves a dissociation of the ballad text from its tune which is frowned upon by modern critics. Whether the ballad was a product of the dance or not, in early times, it was almost certainly sung, rather than recited. The "well-known tunes" she mentions, though they may have been current tunes borrowed from another genre, were probably associated with the text from the first. If the tunes were danced, there is no reason to suppose that the ballads were not danced.

A great deal of Miss Pound's evidence, when it is not regarded in the light of individual authorship, tends to undercut her thesis. Such is the case with her attitude to the refrain (the refrain being, of course, important for group participation in ballads). She cites some instances in which the Child ballads have been "ritualized" into dance songs. Among these are "Barbara Allen" (84) and "The Maid Freed from the Gallows" (95). Another, in a version recovered in Nebraska, shows internal evidence (in its refrain) of having been used as a dance song:





There was an old woman lived on the sea shore  
 Bow down  
 There was an old woman lived on the sea shore,  
 Balance true to me  
 And she had daughters three or four,  
 Saying I'll be true to my love  
 If my love is true to me.<sup>35</sup>

This ballad specimen clearly shows that the ballad could have been used in the dance, though Miss Pound prefers to believe otherwise. She passes over the rather obvious inference that, since the older of two Child versions is more likely to have a refrain, such a refrain could have furnished just the kind of internal evidence of dance-usage found in the above ballad. Gummere feels, in fact, that the amount of refrain to be found in Child's ballads does not necessarily reflect an earlier ballad-refrain relationship:

Out of 502 Scandinavian ballads which [Steenstrup] examined, only 20 lacked a refrain. In English, owing to the increase of chronicle ballads, the figures are not so striking; but they tell the same tale. Of the 305 ballads in Child's collection, 106 show in some version evidence of chorus or refrain. Of some 1250 versions in all, about 300 have a refrain; but among the old ballads in couplets, out of 31, only 7 lack the refrain as they stand, and even these show traces of it.<sup>36</sup>

Study of ballad tunes tends to confirm Gummere's idea of the "decadence of the choral element." Bernard Bronson shows how ballads have been recorded in which there is more melody than text. This is the case in a transcript of "Clerk Colvill" (42) from the singing of a Mrs. Brown

in LM [long metre], quatrains of four-stress lines, rhyming on the second and fourth. There is no refrain, internal or external, and there is no indication in the manuscript that a refrain was sung. The words are not written under the notes: the tune is given first, by itself, and the text follows after, separately. Now the tune is composed of two phrases of equal length followed by a repeat mark, and then a longer phrase also marked for repetition. It is





hard to see how a quatrain could have been sung to such a tune.<sup>37</sup> After considering several possible explanations, Bronson concludes: "The only possible deduction. . .is that [the ballad] must have carried a refrain which Mrs. Brown's copyist, her nephew, never bothered to set down. Presumably, if the words or syllables had made sense, he would have done so: we may infer that they were nonsense syllables."<sup>38</sup> We could also infer that they were directions for the dance which, in a ballad now only sung, are of as little use to the song as nonsense syllables. At any rate, Bronson feels that "the same probability appears. . .to hold in all similar cases of early texts in short couplet form, taken down without their proper tunes."<sup>39</sup> It may have been, then, that the internal evidence of the dance died out as the ballads ceased to function as dance songs.

Miss Pound's attitude to the Danish ballads which, as she admits, were danced, is interesting. In Denmark, she says, "courtly society of the later Middle Ages danced to narrative ballads, and the pieces closely resemble the Child ballads."<sup>40</sup> Danish ballads, of course, reveal much internal evidence of the dance. Miss Pound quotes these examples, among others:

Step up boldly, young knight;  
Honor the maidens in the dance. (244)<sup>41</sup>

Step lightly over the green plain--  
The maid must follow me; (241)



Stand up, stand up, you maidens all,  
 And dance for me a space;  
 And sing for me a ballad  
 About the sons of Lave's race. (366)

Seeming not to realize the importance of evidence that ballads could have been used in the dance, she merely excuses the Danes for not having any wealth of lyric poetry, such as was found in the rest of Europe. Her main point, of course, is that it was the high-born, and not the ordinary people, who danced the ballads. It is not clear why the performance of ballads by a nobleman should preclude its performance by a peasant, but there is evidence that the class distinction in Denmark was not always very clear: "The producers of [Danish] songs were the Danish nobility, but not a small number of noble families who later built the lordly castles; rather a nobility distributed over thousands of farmsteads, who later sank back into the rank of peasants."<sup>42</sup> Even more interesting is the relationship between Faroese and Danish ballads, which might not be unlike the relationship of early and late English ballads:

The contrast between Faroe and Danish versions of the same ballad is interesting. In the Danish songs, which have been divorced from dancing, Thuren points out the shortening of the refrain. He also points out the development of the verse melodies since the form of the verse is no longer held in fixed rhythm by the accompanying dance. This comparison offers interesting suggestions regarding what we must assume to have taken place in England when the songs were separated from the dance.<sup>43</sup>

If anything can be concluded about the relationship of the dance to the ballad, it must be that the two are hardly as clearly separate as Miss Pound thinks. Because the evidence is not such





that we can say "the ballad originated in the dance," Gerould is cautious about attributing very much importance to the dance in the history of balladry: "The habit of dancing, certainly as common as the habit of singing, must. . . have tended to emphasize the rhythms of song until they became instinctive and unconscious. In this way, as I conceive the matter, the dance may well have been an enforcing element in the development of popular music and poetry."<sup>44</sup> Cautious though Gerould is, it is interesting that he should use the words "instinctive and unconscious," of which Gummere would have approved.

This chapter has so far fairly thoroughly considered the relationship of the ballad to its medieval environment, and the theoretical connection of the ballad with the dance, and nothing has yet emerged which is particularly destructive of the communal theory. With these "secondary" concerns taken care of, it remains to investigate the basic principles of the communalist theory of group authorship.

Everyone who calls himself a communalist must believe that group involvement is important to ballad creation, but it is a fact that not all "communalists" agree about the extent of this group involvement. In fact between the position of Gummere, who is perhaps the most extreme of the communalists, and that of Louise Pound, who attacks Gummere from the opposite (individualist) standpoint, there are a number of intermediate views: those, for instance, of people



like G. L. Kittredge and Robert Graves, who, still calling themselves communalists, modify Gummere's theory. These modifications will be considered in due course. Gummere, however, is the critic one looks to to find what is usually thought to be communalism.

Here is Gummere's conception of ballad composition: "Spontaneous composition in a dancing multitude--all singing, all dancing--is a fact of primitive poetry about which we may be as certain as such questions allow us to be certain. Behind individuals stands the human horde. Preceding the beginnings of ancient drama, and in some fashion a foundation for it, Aristotle evidently saw such a horde. An insistent echo of this throng greets us from the ballads."<sup>45</sup> It is easy to see how a statement like this lends itself to identification with the stigma of Romantic primitivism attached to the Grimm Brothers' communalism. But to give Gummere his due, he only hears "echoes" of the primitive horde when he listens to the ballads, a fact which suggests that he considers the ballads and their creators only relatively primitive. Such an assertion is far from outrageous. And there does seem to be psychological truth behind the idea of the Dionysiac mass preceding, and to some extent coexisting with, the Apollonian individual (to use Nietzsche's terms). However, if Gummere's hypothesis is not unreasonable, it is compromised by the evidence he introduces to support it.

Probably the classic example of alleged communal composition occurs in the Faroe Islands where Gummere finds that a largely illiterate<sup>46</sup> and homogeneous populace has apparently originated songs





in groups since at least the seventeenth century. It seems that a ballad or narrative, rather than a lyric type of song was used in lieu of instruments to accompany a ring dance, which is described by V. U. Hammershaimb in his Faerösk Anthologi:

Theirs [the Faroese] is a simple ring dance, generally for one ring, others are formed within so far as space admits. . . . The precentor sings a ballad and the rhythm is stamped with the feet. The dancers pay close attention to his words, since the characteristics of the narrative are brought out by the mime: hands are tightly clasped in the turmoil of battle, and a jubilant leap expresses victory. All the dancers join in the chorus at the end of each stanza, but the stanza is sung only by one or two persons of special repute.<sup>47</sup>

According to Gummere's "good missionary," Pastor Lyngbye, themes for Faroese dance songs were derived from Norwegian or Icelandic sources, a favourite being the story of the hero Sigurd. The Faroese danced, he said, to historical ballads, to lampooning ballads, and to ballads which resemble those in Child's collection. From the communalist's point of view, however, the most important part of Lyngbye's testimony is an account of a group improvisation of a song:

They [the Faroese] sang, to be sure, many old songs about Sigurd, the hero of Icelandic literary traditions. This, however, was not all. They could also make a new ballad, in most dramatic fashion, at the dance; as, for example, when some fisherman has had a mishap with his boat, sturdy companions push him out into the dancing throng, and first one and then another stanza is improvised upon the fatal theme, until a complete story of the situation, with much repetition, we may be sure, uproarious refrain, and considerable dramatic action, is attained.<sup>48</sup>

The obvious difficulty of crediting accounts like Lyngbye's, is their vagueness. Lyngbye says only that a song "is improvised":





He fails to designate the author. Was it the crowd? Or was it the unfortunate sailor who improvised to the "uproarious refrain" supplied by his friends? It is important to know these things, if the kind of communalism in which Gummere seems to believe is to be supported by evidence like Lyngbye's. As a matter of fact, the most damaging criticism that may be made of Gummere's study, The Popular Ballad, is the ambiguity of much of his evidence. The above passage, for instance, might almost as well be cited to prove authorship by an individual, though an individual to some extent supported and inspired by a throng. To be sure, it might not be amiss to call such a practise communalism and, in effect, this is what G. L. Kittredge does. His definition of communalism is not Gummere's: "Different members of the throng, one after another, may chant each his verse, and the sum of these various contributions make a song. This is communal composition, though each verse, taken by itself, is the work of an individual."<sup>49</sup>

Robert Graves, stating a "communalist" position in 1927, makes even fewer claims for the group: "The peculiarity of communal composition [he says] is that this original author is merely acting as spokesman for the group and when the ballad is complete will not claim it as his own."<sup>50</sup> Gummere would have the throng, seized by an emotion, spontaneously create a song, though he never makes the details of this creation clear. Kittredge's definition acknowledges the necessity of being more specific, of deciding how actual stanzas



came to be, but his decision to allot various stanzas to various individuals seems rather ingenious. Once you have conceded as much to the individual as Kittredge has, of course, there seems to be no reason not to go even further, to Graves' idea that one individual creates the song, though he could not have done so without participating in a "group emotion."

It is relatively easy for the "civilized" ballad theorist to imagine a throng experiencing the same emotion simultaneously (a factor involved in all three communalist definitions), but difficult for him to imagine it making that emotion vocal in exactly the same words. Only Gummere, of the three, fails to experience this difficulty, and he feels obliged to chastise modern scepticism:

Ballad critics of eighty years ago, with the conspicuous exception of A. W. Schlegel, were fain to welcome the doctrine of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm that a song of the people is made by the people as a whole. The process, it was conceded, lay in a mystery; but mystery had no terror for an age which delighted in abstractions and ideals. Critics of our own day, on the other hand, have closed accounts with the ideal and the abstract; and they are all of Schlegel's mind.<sup>51</sup>

Most moderns, it is true, are "of Schlegel's mind," and fail to see how the ballad could be extemporaneously composed, to concede the most, by an individual supported by a chorus of people. This sort of composition still takes place, however, though not exactly of ballads. Improvising songs like "Hey Lawdy, Lawdy," are popular at parties and can be sung, if patience and lungs hold out, literally all night long. The song goes like this (I use one of the most common verses):





Sing this song in every land,  
 Hey Lawdy, Lawdy lo.  
 Join together, hand in hand,  
 Hey Lawdy, Lawdy lo.

Hey Lawdy, Lawdy, Lawdy,  
 Hey Lawdy, Lawdy, lo.  
 Hey Lawdy, Lawdy, Lawdy,  
 Hey Lawdy, Lawdy, lo.

The first and third lines are sung by an individual, while the refrain (the second and fourth lines) and the chorus are sung by everyone. The point is that the song follows a set form, already known by all the singers, and improvisation is rather elementary. Many songs could be used to illustrate this technique, though, and it is not even too great a step to use some of the simpler ballads for this purpose. Ballads like "The Maid Freed from the Gallows" (95) could almost be sung, without previous knowledge, by a crowd led by someone who knew the first verse and the tune. The "climax of relatives" makes the pattern of the ballad easily recognizable to anyone who is at all familiar with ballad form. Even more complex ballads, moreover, with the help of chorus, refrain, and commonplace, could have been largely participated in by a cooperating throng.

Such improvisation sounds not unlike what Graves calls a communal composition. The important thing to notice, however, is that when one talks about communalism, whether to applaud or criticise it, he must realize that the term "communalism" does not always imply the same thing. Communal theories differ according to differing conceptions of the function of the group in ballad composition.



However, it is difficult to see how a modification of the communal theory like Graves' need arouse much objection, if one can escape communalism's unfortunate primitivistic connotations.

Whatever the actual degree of group participation assigned to ballad origins, anti-communalists still quarrel with the idea that the place of the individual in poetic creation should be usurped by a throng. Their basic objection to communalism is that individual composition is more likely than group composition. Miss Pound, for instance, takes great pains to show that primitive cultures do have individually composed songs. The first part of this chapter was devoted to showing why the musical habits of primitives have, at best, only a limited relationship to a medieval genre like the ballad, but because savages may compose individually is no proof that they did not compose communally. The fact is that people know that individual composition can take place, and what is demonstrably possible is bound to seem universally preferable to what is obscure and doubtful.

An objection which perhaps demands more investigation is that, admitting communal composition of a sort, the product will usually be unlike the ballad. Rudimentary Negro songs, for instance, which are often thought to be of communal origin, often have little narrative strain, and less poetical quality. Alan Lomax feels that "The Boll Weevil" is a communal song. The last verse goes like this:

If anybody axes you who writ this song,  
Tell em it was a dark skinned nigger  
Wid a pair of blue duckins on  
A-lookin' for a home,  
Jes a-lookin' for a home.





No one would mistake this for a ballad, but to contrast "The Boll Weevil" and other "communal" songs with the ballad is not necessarily to show that the ballads could not have been similarly produced. The anti-communalist formula, which supplies in positiveness what it lacks in logic, usually reads as follows: "No modern community, not even one of naive, isolated, and homogeneous character, such as a mountain cave or a cattle ranch, has produced communally a ballad resembling the Child ballads. Therefore, no community, anywhere or at anytime could have done so."<sup>52</sup> Gummere acknowledges what truth there is in statements like this, but he does not feel that it destroys his theory: "There is. . .no doubt in regard to the frequency of improvisation down to this day, not of the ballad to be sure, but of what in better times would have gone to the making of the ballad. Even some modern ballads seem to have this spontaneous if not communal origin."<sup>53</sup> Given communal origin of some sort, Gummere's statement is not so unreasonable, though his reference to "better times" is perhaps evidence of a nostalgic attitude to the past. He feels there is no reason to suppose that the ballad genre suddenly sprang full-grown into the world. As with most things, there would have been intermediate stages, and a communally composed rudimentary song may well have been an ur-form of the ballad. The trouble with this idea is that, as far as we know, the ballad did not have a long time to develop. If it represents a verse form which originated after the Conquest, and was fairly well defined by at least the twelfth century, then





its early state must have been something more than rudimentary.

Some ballad musicologists, like Phillips Barry, criticise communalism from a musical point of view:

The logical weakness of the [communal] theory is patent to any open mind. If it be made to work at all as a hypothesis, as it has been made to work after a certain fashion, this result is attained only by concession of the pre-existence of a melody to act as a self-starter in every case of possible collective composition. Once such a pre-existence of melody is admitted, the whole theory falls into a logical collapse. If das volk dichtet be a true formula; if the folk, or the singing, dancing throng ever made any songs by the collective action of a group mind, it should have made the music at the same time as the words. If it did not make the music, and the best exponents of the dogma declare that it did not, then the folk composed only poetry and not folksong.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps the best way to answer this criticism of communalism is to quote another "exponent of the dogma," Bertrand Bronson, who also feels that the composition of a ballad presupposes a tune, though he is not led to be anti-communal by that conclusion:

During its whole known history, the ballad tune has shown no inclination to transcend or exceed in any manner the structural bounds that we know today, but also, during its whole history, this folk-tune pattern has shown no preference for ballads, or narrative songs over any other kind of traditional song text, whether work song, carol or personal lyric. . . . The first ballad was sung to a tune. Regardless of whether that particular tune came into existence simultaneously with the first ballad, the form of the tune--this ubiquitous musical pattern found with nearly every kind of popular song--was already in existence. For the proponent of the theory of communal ballad origins it is even more necessary to believe this to be true that it is for the believer in individual composition. For a group can join in communal singing only when the members of it are in approximate agreement about the tune.<sup>55</sup>

Why Barry should consider it such a damaging criticism of communalism, then, that the folk could create only poetry, is not entirely





clear. The communal composition of poetry, even if it need presuppose a tune, is no mean feat. It may, of course, be possible for a group to compose a tune and a melody at the same time, but, again, the time needed for a song so composed to develop into something like a ballad would probably be longer than the period which was available. The indefiniteness which attends the early text-tune relationship in the ballads, is one aspect of a nebulous atmosphere which hangs about ballad origins in general.

The unfortunate thing about the communal theory of origins is that its supporting evidence is usually all circumstantial. Ballads were probably composed in the Middle Ages; they were possibly used as dance songs; and they may have been composed communally, though there is not a single recorded case of collective composition which cannot be challenged in one way or another. Of course "there has not been brought to light a single modern ballad resembling the Child or Gruntvig ballads which is clearly the result of individual or of any other kind of authorship."<sup>56</sup> The most positive thing that can be said about communalism is that it has not been invalidated, even though it is no longer fashionable to credit a throng with creative powers. The alternative of individual composition is not a satisfying one, and the dilemma remains.





### CHAPTER III

#### OTHER INFLUENCES ON THE GENRE

Ballad scholarship has so complicated the problem of origins, that one can no longer decide to be an individualist or a communalist. There are other factors to be weighed before one decides, if it is possible to decide, how the ballads came to be. Minstrelsy, literary forms and things ecclesiastical are all part of the medieval milieu in which the ballad existed, and, among other things, they have all been associated with the ballad at one time or another. This chapter tries to determine the rightful place of some of these possible influences on the ballad mystique.

It has always been assumed that the minstrel has had something to do with the ballad, and many have thought that the minstrel is an artist who creates the ballads which are subsequently "admired, acquired, and spread by persons who have an aptitude for minstrelsy."<sup>1</sup> Even Gummere, the foremost spokesman for communalism admits that "from the earliest medieval times songs about men and events were made by the minstrel."<sup>2</sup> Of course Gummere thinks that the minstrel never wrote anything like the traditional ballads. But without knowing exactly how the ballads were composed, and exactly what sort of thing the minstrels did write, it is difficult to endorse Gummere's statement. All we really know about the minstrels is that they were



first attached to the great houses of medieval England, sometimes as hereditary entertainers of the lord and lady and their guests. (The word "minstrel" comes from the Latin ministralis, or attendant, and implies a patron.) As T. F. Henderson says: "During what may be termed the golden age of balladry--it seems to have had a golden age at least in Denmark--[the ballads] were specially favored by the upper classes, and may well have been sung in the halls of the castles with harp accompaniment by accomplished musicians, whilst the ladies danced to their music and sentiment with appropriate gestures."<sup>3</sup> The later ballad singers are often idealistically represented as wandering bards whose main pleasure in life was to make everyone happy. They went strolling, says one commentator,

from house to hamlet, from tavern to cottage, with their songs old and new. Most of the ballads went to a fitting tune, but one tune did duty for many ballads. Some, perhaps, were rather chantingly recited than sung; and the song or the chant, when given by a professed performer, was usually accompanied by a harp, cithern (guitar), fiddle, or other suitable instrument. Here and there a skilled private person would be sure to emulate in his own little circle the completeness of the professor; while much more often the ballad would be given in the huge chimney-nook of a farmhouse or on the bench of a village green to some casual knot of listeners, in such regular and imperfect fashion as the memory and voice of some old woman or peasant youth could attain.<sup>4</sup>

Though the attachment of the minstrel to the upper classes obsesses some critics, Child implies that ballads were the work of a professional fraternity whose business it was to furnish tales and songs for the amusement of all classes of the people. The ballads do contain internal evidence of address to both the upper classes:





Lyth and listin, gentilmen,  
 That be of frebore blode;  
 ("A Gest of Robyn Hode" 117)

and the middle classes:

Herken, god yemen,  
 Comly, corteys and god.  
 ("Robin Hood and the Monk" 119)

Though most scholars have assumed that there must have been some sort of professional or semi-professional musicians in the Middle Ages, the connection of these people to medieval song is not the easiest thing to establish. In fact "there is no record at all of the vocal performance of any of the English carols by any professional entertainer of the kind to which the term 'minstrel' was applied in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries. The evidence that by 'minstrel' was then understood an instrumental musician playing for pay of one kind or another is simply overwhelming. . . . The key verb is regularly 'play', not 'sing'."<sup>5</sup> R. L. Greene, who makes this rather surprising revelation, says that tabors, harps, and lutes were used with narrative songs like the ballads, but that even their oral performance must have been limited: "In the usual arrangement of the medieval hall the musicians' or minstrel's gallery was located at the opposite end of the hall from the high table on floor or dais, and therefore at a distance quite suitable for instrumental music during dinner but ill-adapted to song in an age when the words counted for as much as the music and a singer needed to be near his audience."<sup>6</sup>





Of course the occupation of the minstrel (whatever the term means) shows a decline corresponding to the rise of the street ballads, and by the period of Elizabeth I, minstrels were legally ranked with rogues, vagabonds and beggars. In 1543, an act was passed "for the advancement of true religion and for the abolishment of the contrary." It stated that "froward and malicious minds, intending to subvert the true exposition of scripture, have taken upon them, by printed rhymes, etc. subtilly and craftily to instruct the youth of this realm, untruly. For reformation whereof, his majesty considereth it most requisite to purge his realm of all such books, ballads, rhymes and songs, as pestiferous and noisome."<sup>7</sup>

All we may safely say concerning the relationship of the minstrel to the ballad is that it seems logical that professional (or even amateur) entertainers should be interested in the ballad, and that their professional or personal interest might lead them at least to try the form, and perhaps to imitate it.<sup>8</sup> Certainly little about the minstrel can be found out from the ballads themselves, whose impersonality is one of their chief characteristics.

Whether the minstrel or the throng was responsible for the ballad, the connection of the ballad with related medieval literary forms, both popular and "artistic," is worthy of exploration. Entwhistle feels that the ballad form "has its historical relation to other forms before and after, and itself implies a chronology, though we may not know it."<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, Miss Pound finds



a good deal of evidence of literary influence in the ballads. She finds, for example, a literary use of alliteration in "The Hunting of the Cheviot" (162), and specimens of special fourteenth and fifteenth century poetic vocabulary, not available to the common person, in other ballads. Furthermore, she notices that certain individual ballads conform to medieval literary conventions. "Sir Aldingar" (59), which resembles a romance, contains the conventional premonitory dream; "Robyn and Gandeleyne" (115) has a chanson d'aventure opening; "The Rose of England" (166) is an allegory; "The Gest of Robyn Hode" (117) approaches an epic chanson; "The Battle of Otterburn" (161) is a verse chronicle; "The Gray Cock" (248) is an aube; "Barbara Allen's Cruelty" (84) is nearly a pure lyric; "Johnny Campbell" (114) is a coronach; "The Holy Well" and "The Bitter Withy" are carols.<sup>10</sup>

In view of this literary evidence it should not be surprising to find that a good deal can be said about the relationship of the ballad to other medieval literature. Of the genres about to be considered, only the folk tale is not mentioned by Miss Pound, though, with the epic, the romance and the carol, it has been thought to overlap with the ballad in one way or another.

There are certain theories of folk song origins which may be dismissed with little hesitation. Cecil Sharp, who has done valuable work on folk melodies, mars an otherwise useful book (English Folksong: Some Conclusions) with a cumbersome theory of ballad







origins. Sharp endorses Joseph Jacobs' idea (in English Fairy Tales) that all folk tales of serious character were interspersed with rhyme. The discovery of this "cante-fable" form (a name adapted from the medieval French genre consisting of both prose and verse) assuages Jacobs' fears that the folk could not be credited with the composition of continuous narrative ballads. From the cante-fable, Jacobs believes, both the ballad and the folk tale were originated: the ballad eliminated the prose framework, the folk tale elaborated it. Sharp discovers a version of "Lord Thomas and Fair Elanor" (73) of which the singer assured him that three lines out of an otherwise sung ballad, should be spoken. This, he feels, "is clearly a case of a cante-fable that had very nearly, but not quite, passed into the form of a ballad, thus corroborating Mr. Jacobs' theory."<sup>11</sup> Sharp obviously leaps at this conclusion, but, what is more unfortunate, he goes on to elaborate Jacobs' theory. According to Sharp, the ballad began mysteriously by the cante-fable method, among primitive people to whom drama and narrative appeal as to children (the primitive being incapable of the analysis of feeling found in song). Once ballads were evolved, Sharp thought that they would be sung by minstrels for the upper classes, among whom, unfortunately, the demand was for "something less ephemeral and limited in scope than the ballads of the people."<sup>12</sup> To satisfy the nobility, the minstrels would combine the ballads, perhaps like the "Gest," to make "long romances



of epics." Sharp boldly attributes the Iliad, the Norse sagas and eddas, the Nibelungenlied, the Cid romances, and the Arthuriad to this, or a similar, process. The next step is the inventing of printing which provides the highborn with their own literature so that the minstrel has to break up the romances into their component ballads, which appeal, again, to the folk. This theory depends, of course, on the unlikely assumption that romance and ballad are mutually exclusive, unable to exist along side of one another. And it seems equally unlikely that there would need to be as much manipulation of the ballad by the minstrel as Sharp suggests.

The cante-fable, or folk tale theory, by itself, however, is not supported only by Sharp. Among the more forceful of other supporters is Miss Martha Beckwith, who makes a study of the English ballad in Jamaica. Though Jamaica had been occupied by the English for two hundred years, Miss Beckwith found that "Little Musgrove" (81) and "The Maid Freed from the Gallows" (95) were the only two Child ballads surviving among the Jamaican Negroes. She was struck, moreover, by the fact that the verses of ballads she did find were strung "upon a connecting thread of prose to carry along the action."<sup>13</sup> On the basis of testimony from other people who had discovered a similar prose-song relationship elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> Miss Beckwith decided to apply a cante-fable hypothesis to the English ballads, the cante-fable form being familiar to the European folk tale, as Grimm's collection shows. The folk tale, she says, resembles the ballad in





a number of ways--in impersonality, stock language, and stock incidents--and would seem to be a closely related genre. But Miss Beckwith's most important point concerns the lack of connectives between ballad stanzas. She hypothesizes that explanatory prose connecting ballad stanzas probably existed at one time: "The prose, which is more or less extemporaneous, drops easily away as the story becomes familiar to the folk. Presently it comes about that the song carries the story with it in the people's mind and there is no need of the recital to explain its meaning."<sup>15</sup> The ballad refrain is similarly explained: "Fragmentary scraps of song," discovered in the folk tale may go to make up the refrain. The English ballad refrain is often nonsense to us, but perhaps it was once "attached to those dialogue songs with which it had been associated in dialogue form."<sup>16</sup> Finally, Miss Beckwith finds that the song-stories she collected, reproduce the subject matter and the general atmosphere of traditional ballads.<sup>17</sup>

Miss Beckwith is aware of the difficulty of demonstrating her hypothesis. Based as it is on a study of "modern" traditional songs, there can be at most a remote possibility that the ballads were so evolved. But there is a more fundamental objection to her hypothesis. She feels that the prose string which ties Jamaican songs together probably disappears when the story is well enough known that the prose is implicit in the singing of the ballad. But would it not seem more likely that prose connectives between ballad stanzas would be supplied by a modern need for explanation?



It is not hard to believe that a fatalistic and not entirely rational folk would ask for no explanation of enigmatic ballads, but it is difficult to see the "logical" modern listener in a similar light. MacEdward Leach would agree. He notices "the tendency of the ballad to pass quickly over the first half of the plot--the unstable situation--to come to the second--the solution. It is somewhat like beginning a play in the last act, and it often leaves the modern reader bewildered, feeling that he has not been given quite enough information. . . ." <sup>18</sup> On the contrary, the folk are not concerned with why the ballads are thus and so, not being "introspective or analytical. Rather they are concerned with the drama of the moment and the character's reaction to it." <sup>19</sup> It is interesting to observe, apropos of this discussion, that the same "Boll Weevil" song mentioned in Chapter Two recently appeared on the hit parade, though in a greatly modified form. All that was left of the original was a chorus ("Lookin' for a home, jes' lookin' for a home"). The rest of the song consisted of narrated dialogue between a farmer and a Boll Weevil, all introduced by a stanza setting the scene. This modern version of the "Boll Weevil" invests a song with prose where there was no prose before, suggesting a tendency the reverse of Miss Beckwith's cante-fable theory.

Entwhistle describes a theory not dissimilar to that of Miss Beckwith; a derivation of Spanish ballads from the epic:





The people, hanging on the lips of the [epic] minstrel, caused him to repeat the most striking passages in a long epic poem so as to commit to memory the happiest verses. They forgot then the insipid commonplaces, the sluggish developments common in these poems of the decadence, but they faithfully preserved the memory of the culminating points of the narrative or the finest episodes which these strolling rhapsodes of the last epoch of epic recitation had been unable to alter or had been lucky enough to imagine in their search for new sensations. These passages, thus conserved and often repeated by heart, when isolated by the surrounding people, became the oldest extant ballads.<sup>20</sup>

Entwhistle himself realizes the difficulty involved in generally applying this theory. As he says, "a straightforward theory of fragmentation would be hard to apply since the epic originals are, outside Spain, almost wholly conjectural."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, for England, W. M. Hart has a theory, the exact reverse of Entwhistle's, that there is a consistent development from the ballad to the epic by way of the "Gest." But, as Gerould notices, Hart's theory contains the seeds of its own destruction: "'Between the narrative art of Beowulf [says Hart] and that of [the ballad and other forms] is a great gulf fixed.' The fact is. . . that neither the 'Gest' nor the Danish 'Marsk Stig', which is similarly compounded, ought to be regarded as an unachieved epic. The ballad and the heroic epic have little in common save that each tells a story."<sup>22</sup> English balladry seems to have had a much closer relationship with the romance than with the epic.

England began to assimilate the French Romance culture in the tenth century. By the eleventh the Romanized Normans had taken over the country, and a good deal of "English" literature was written



in French. It is not surprising, then, that Child's collection shows a number of ballads dependent on French Romance, rather than on German epical tradition. (Most of these, of course, are English. Scotland was not as much affected by the Norman invasion, but retained instead a close relationship with Denmark and Norway.) The ballads resemble medieval romances mainly in motifs and metrical form (they share the fashion for stanzaic verse). Hodgart feels that the Breton lays, a sub-genre of romance, have the closest relationship to ballads, and he cites some ballads whose motifs resemble those of certain lays. Among these are: "Tam Lin" (39) ("Ranval and Guigemar"), "Sir Cawline" (61) ("Lay of the Thorne"), "Fair Annie" (62) ("Lay of the Ash") and "King Orfeo" (19) ("Sir Orfeo").<sup>23</sup> The closeness of stories which merely share motifs has been questioned before, however, and we are probably on surer ground when deriving ballads from romances which they more closely resemble. The stories, for example, which make up the Arthurian cycle were worked into a courtly form in the twelfth century, were expanded into French prose romances in the thirteenth century, and finally arrived in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Arthurian legend survives in ballads like "The Boy and the Mantle" (29), "King Arthur and King Cornwall" (30) and "The Marriage of Sir Gawain" (31). However, these pieces bear evidence of individual composition, and they perhaps exist largely independent of the Arthurian romances.<sup>24</sup> Other ballads resembling







romances, which are rather more likely to have romance derivation, are: "King Henry" (32), "Hind Horn" (17), "King John and the Bishop" (45), "Sir Cawline" (61), "Lady Diamond" (269) and "Blanche flour and Jellyflorice" (300). Of these, only "Hind Horn" may be early, since the romance of "King Horn" exists in a manuscript of the thirteenth century. The rest were probably derived from romances in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There are two disadvantages to the romance-to-ballad theory. One is that the relationship is not extensive enough to indicate a general trend. The other is that most of the ballads likely derived from romances are not of very high quality.

The lyric carol, which has already received some mention, may be the most important medieval form allied to the ballad because of its connection with the dance, a relationship which many have tried to prove for the ballad. Itself certainly from the dance, the carol has features of repetition and refrain in common with the ballad. Hodgart says, in fact, "if the English and Scottish ballads were ever danced, it must have been to the carol that they were adapted."<sup>25</sup> However, this assertion is qualified by the clear distinction now made between carol and traditional ballad. "That this distinction was well understood in the Middle Ages is plain from the extreme rarity of the occurrence of carols and ballads in the same manuscript and, in fact, from the general scarcity of ballad texts in manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries."<sup>26</sup>



The carol is lyrical, not narrative, but the key to the difference between carol and ballad lies in the form. The carol form varies, but it is commonly found in a verse of three rhymed lines (sung by the leader), and one unrhymed line (sung as refrain by the chorus): aaaB. A few ballads, like "Robyn and Gandeleyne" and "The Elfin Knight," have this external refrain, and some carols have the characteristic internal or alternating refrain of the ballads: aBaB, but few ballads have the initial and external burden of the carols. Such overlapping of carol and ballad forms as does take place, may suggest a relationship, though a limited one. At any rate, since the carol seems to precede the ballad,<sup>27</sup> the ballad form may be a modification of the carol form.

Early students of the ballads failed to discuss the ballads in terms of the largely ecclesiastical medieval environment in which they first appear. It requires only a casual glance at the chronology of the various ballads to discover that the earlier ones are ecclesiastical in subject matter. Since there are few ballads extant in really old manuscripts, some scholars argue that earlier ballads, which likely were lost, may have been largely ecclesiastical in character.<sup>28</sup> The fact that there are so few early ballads of any description extant leaves the question open, though it is impossible to say that we might not have had an equal or larger number of ballads on secular subjects had more been written down. In fact, if the proportion of surviving secular lyrics to religious lyrics be





considered, there is a good reason why the earliest recorded ballads should have been religious:

Within the thirteenth century the Middle English lyric had already developed a well-grounded artistic technique. That a comparatively small number of these songs have come down to us--and these only in single manuscripts--does not prove, however, that the number produced was small. . . . We have to consider the medium of their circulation. Whether English minstrels of the thirteenth century made any compilation of their songs we do not know. If they did, none has survived. Accordingly we must depend almost wholly upon collections made in religious houses, and these for the most part included only those which were religious or "profitable" in character. In the case of the secular lyrics of the century, therefore, the proportion which has been lost is probably very large indeed.<sup>29</sup>

This statement about thirteenth century lyrics reflects on the possible influence of clerical collectors on ballad survivals. It would be reasonable to conclude, judging by the evidence of the lyrics, that the church, being apparently the only preserver of songs, would have preserved more religious than secular ballads. A possible reason why so few religious ballads survive, of course, is that there never were very many.

Nevertheless, the remaining religious ballads, and religious traces in otherwise secular lyrics justify some inquiry into a possible ecclesiastical influence, which may have manifested itself in several ways. It has been suggested, for instance, that the ballads which have religious stanzas may be religious in origin. "The Battle of Otterburn" (161) fits into this pattern:

Now let us all for the Perssy praye  
to Jhesu most of might  
To bring hys soule to the bliss of heven  
for he was a gentyll knight.



as does "The Hunting of the Cheviot" (162):

Jhesue Christ our balys bete,  
and to the blys us bring  
Thus was the mounting of the Chevyat;  
God send us alle good endyng.

These "tag" stanzas tend to be dropped from the later versions of ballads, again suggesting the secularization which might have gone on. However,

a conclusion with a form of prayer, found in a great many carols is not a sign that the piece is designed for use in church rather than for a social gathering in a hall. A benediction is the standard conclusion for a piece of medieval poetry of almost any kind, narrative as well as lyric, and often for a song or a tale of completely secular or even coarse nature.<sup>30</sup>

Not necessarily an indication of strong religious feeling, then, the tag stanzas may have been merely a convenient way for the ballad maker to "wrap things up."

Miss Pound finds other musical and poetic forms which, although not ballads, have affiliations with the genre (in lyrical quality, refrain, and use of incremental repetition), and a religious background. Such a piece is the fourteenth century "Song of the Incarnation":

I sing of a mayden that is makeles;  
King of alle kynges to her sone che ches.

He cam also styлле ther his moder was,  
As dew in aprille that fallyt on the gras.

He cam also styлле to his moder's bour,  
As dew in aprille that fallyt on the flour.

He cam also styлле ther his moder lay;  
As dew in aprille that fallyt on the spray.





Moder and mayden was never non but she;  
Well might swich a lady Godes moder be.

"The Stoning of Stephen" and "The Murder of Thomas à Becket" are two others of the same variety. Miss Pound argues that, if one includes the evidence of songs other than ballads, the ecclesiastical material seems to have dominated the singing of the Middle Ages. It has already been shown why this is not necessarily so. She suggests, moreover, that clerics were responsible for the ballads since it was in their interests, so to speak, to have the Biblical material popularized. One wonders why Miss Pound should adopt this particular view when she herself suggests two other equally attractive alternatives. One is that the ballads were created by other hands, probably those of minstrels, and pressed into service by religious figures as convenient vehicles for the Word contained in Biblical stories. Another is that minstrels would suit their material to their audience, ecclesiastical songs being the order of the day when the audience was ecclesiastical. There is some evidence favoring this possibility. William of Malmesbury tells of a singer inserting religious material into his lighter songs.<sup>31</sup>

Probably a more valuable line of inquiry, from an ecclesiastical point of view, concerns medieval ecclesiastical music. Though little is known about medieval popular music, enough is known about medieval ecclesiastical and court music to eliminate the latter, for all practical purposes, as a possible influence on the ballads.



Courtly music was sophisticated and complicated and little suited for popular adaptation. We are on firmer ground if we suppose that church music, which was restricted to simpler forms, was more in line with the tastes of the people. In fact, as Barry says, "our modal folk-tunes are of a pattern that has descended to us from the Greeks through medieval ecclesiastical music. It has been shown that a part at least of traditional Danish ballad music is nothing more than an adaptation of church tunes set in ecclesiastical modes."<sup>32</sup> Sharp tells us that "the church modes were used in polyphonic music, both ecclesiastical and secular, down to the close of the first quarter of the seventeenth century."<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the ecclesiastical method of performance, with solo and refrain, might well have been incorporated into popular music.

Gerould offers the Hymns of St. Godric (probably composed before 1170) as an example of "what an inexpert--though devout--poet whose ear was attuned to the rhythms of traditional verse, was likely to accomplish when he tried to make in the vernacular something that sounded like a Latin hymn."<sup>34</sup> The first of the hymns runs as follows:

Sainte Marie virgine,  
 Moder Jesu Cristes Nazarene,  
 Onfo, scild, help thin Godric,  
 Onfang, bring hehlic with the in godes ric.

Sainte Marie, Cristes bur  
 maidines clenhad, moderes fur,  
 dilie mine sinne, rixe in min mod,  
 bring me to winne with self god.





This piece may illustrate that traditional verse was suitable for use in the four-beat couplet of folk song, though Davies puts little stock in the idea: "It has been argued that Latin Hymns were Godric's model, but there is certainly no particular hymn like this and his rhythm needs much pinching and pulling to prove anything a likeness. It may be he writes in a native popular tradition about which very little is known."<sup>35</sup>

At any rate, a tendency to alternate heavy and light stresses becomes marked in hymns of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and tends to replace earlier quantitative meters. "Equitabat Bovo," which is quoted above, shows how close the rhythms of Latin hymns and pieces in the vernacular could be to each other. "Equitabat Bovo" is a translation into Latin from the vernacular, and yet resembles the rhythms of later folk song. Musical form, then, could have been the determining factor in the production of the ballad genre. The importance of this theory is that it explains variations of ballad form from country to country. As the musical form varied, so the form of the ballad varied.

There is little doubt that the field of ballad musicology is a promising one. In fact, no modern study of the ballads can be complete which ignores the ballad music. Studies of the relationship of the line of ballad poetry to its accompanying musical phrase, and related enquiries which people like Bertrand Bronson have begun, show more promise of revealing (as much as is possible)



where the ballads probably came from than any other facet of balladry now under investigation.<sup>36</sup>

However, no study has yet been made which demonstrates the origin of the ballad once and for all. Probably there is no simple answer to the question of origins. That is why all the influences mentioned in this chapter--minstrel, literary, ecclesiastical and musical--are important to some degree. Some of them might have had a significant effect on the ballad form, some of them might have influenced individual ballads, but none, in itself, is a better solution to the problem of origins than communalism or individualism.





## CHAPTER IV

### THE BALLAD AND ORAL TRADITION

The view of the collective ballad may have been obscured for a while by the "unpopular" concerns of Chapter Three. In fact there is nothing in the third chapter, except the cante-fable theory, which suggests that the ballad is folk literature. There is a very good reason for this "popular" designation, of course, though it has little to do with ultimate ballad origins. It is now generally agreed that whatever the ballad's formative background, its character is assumed during the process of oral transmission over a number of centuries. Like migration, oral transmission or, as it is sometimes called, "communal re-creation," belongs to the later history of balladry. A certain amount of unanimity has been reached as to its importance, if not its effects. The process by which the folk makes a song its own can be demonstrated with considerable success because the oral tradition has continued into this century, and has been rather well documented.

Recognition of the importance of tradition is not new, of course, though from Gerould's critical work tradition has been assigned most of the credit for having made ballads what they are. But even Gummere tried to strike a balance between the effects of his mysterious communal composition, and the shaping factor of tra-



dition. In the following statement one perhaps notes a reluctance to give all to the oral tradition, together with an awakening recognition of its significance:

The impersonal character of our ballads is largely the work of this traditional process. The ballad itself, the original choral and dramatic type, fairly well preserved in "The Maid Freed From the Gallows", derived its impersonal note from the choral fact, from the consent of many voices, and from the dominance of dramatic interest, so that even individual improvisation was objective in every way; but there was quite another influence at work in the slow generation of communal memory. It is not simply the changes from stage to stage, not simply the local variations, though these are interesting enough in the study of a ballad of many versions; it is the effacing fingers of tradition herself which sweep gradually away a hundred original marks and make, in the course of time, a new impersonality, a new objectivity. By the old logical phrase the ballad gets objectivity in intention from first origins and condition of form, while the actual and separate ballads get objectivity in extension from successive stages of the traditional process.<sup>1</sup>

Gummere did not realize that, having explained the present shape of the ballad in terms of oral transmission, he had compromised his theory that the qualities peculiar to the ballads resulted "from first origins," since the original ballads were not necessarily like ballads which have been a long time in the oral tradition.

The importance of oral transmission has long been recognized,<sup>2</sup> but it was thought for some time that the most significant thing the folk could do to a ballad, because of a naturally conservative attitude to what was traditional, was to preserve it in its original form. Certainly a natural disinclination to change goes with the superstition of uneducated peoples. Miss Pound speaks, for instance, of songs and dances handed down among South American Indians:





"The dance, like the tribal palaver, is a dominant factor in tribal life. For it the Amazonian treasures the songs of his fathers, and will master strange rhymes and words that for him no longer have meaning; he only knows that they are the correct lines, the phrases he ought to sing at such functions, because they have always been sung. They are the words of the time-honored tribal melodies."<sup>3</sup> English and Scottish ballad singers may not be tribally organized, or conscious of any magical or other significance in their songs, but they do preserve things for which the only apparent explanation must be the authority of tradition. An example is this Shetland ballad of "Sir Orfeo" (19) which preserves a Norse refrain not understood by its reciter:

Der lived a king inta da aste,  
                   Scowan ùrla grun.  
 Der lived a lady in da wast,  
                   Whar giorten han grùn oarlac.

It is not difficult to persuade people to believe in the incredibly retentive memory of the folk, or to suggest that tradition dies hard. One need only point to a tradition-bound Britain to find centuries-old ceremonies and rites still practised. In balladry, as one might expect, this traditional influence is important. But though the passive or conservative influence of the folk supplied the genre with staying power, the ballad was certainly not "a fixed entity," as Gerould suggests.<sup>4</sup> Cecil Sharp was the first to effectively argue that the popular tradition is a creative one, both in words and music, and his use of the terminology of evolution



in discussing balladry remains a useful framework.

The conservative influence mentioned above, Sharp called "continuity." But though Sharp had experienced first-hand "the amazing accuracy of the memories of folk-singers,"<sup>5</sup> his studies also showed that memory was only part of oral transmission. To account for changes which he observed taking place in ballads, he postulated the terms "variation," by which the folk cause changes in their received material, and "selection," by which it endorses and preserves those changes which appeal to it. All this sounds highly complicated and in a way it is, but it describes a process which is carried out more or less unconsciously by the folk.

As Sharp realized, variations introduced into ballad words and music, were not all good. In this sense the selection of good, rather than bad, changes is important in maintaining the artistic quality of ballads. Not all critics believe that the folk is capable of exercising its own selection, however. It is the conviction of some that communal re-creation is a degenerative process. This feeling may have been first generated by Child, who says: "At every stage of oral transmission. . .we must suppose that some accidental variations from what was delivered would be introduced, and occasionally some wilful variations. Memory will fail at times; at times the listener will hear amiss or will not understand, and a perversion of sense will ensue or absolute nonsense--nonsense





which will be servilely repeated, and which repetition may make more gross."<sup>6</sup> That the folk does introduce changes which can only be called corruptions is a well documented fact.<sup>7</sup> A typical example of what can happen is recorded (in Somerset) by Cecil Sharp:

I once noted down a set of words of "Little Sir Hugh". . . from a very bright and intelligent singer. Her version of the ballad was a very full one and quite intelligible, except for the two opening lines which she sang as follows:

Do rain, do rain, American corn  
Do rain both great and small.

The singer was quite unable to explain these astounding lines, but on comparing them with other recorded versions of the same ballad I discovered that they were but a corruption of

It do rain, it do rain in Merry Lincoln,  
It do rain both great and small.

To the Somerset singer Lincoln is an unknown name, and the presence of this single and unintelligible word was enough to corrupt the meaning of the whole passage.<sup>8</sup>

It is evidence of this sort which leads people like T. F. Henderson to disparage the workings of tradition:

True, unlearned people have limited powers of invention; unlearned tradition is also sometimes tenacious of the general gist of the story, for it is the story that specially appeals to it; and there are some remarkable instances of stanzas being apparently preserved, during many generations, in one tradition--whether wholly unlearned or not--which have been lost in another. But unlearned tradition evidently indulges in inventions of a sort. Generally, also, it is very careless as to expression and rhyme, or rather it tends to make the ballad "popular" in the sense of being mean and common and rude in style, and "impersonal," destitute of the traces of individual authorship, for the simple reason that it has been gradually remoulded by the processes of instinctively stupid interference with the original text, by the ignorant touches of those by whom it has during many generations been preserved, by their inevitable preference for their own colloquial and, in a literary sense, obtuse method of expression, and the generally prosy and jejune, and often confused character of their notions and sentiments.<sup>9</sup>

Like Henderson, J. R. Moore is hostile to the suggestion that the



folk may actually improve the ballad, and his argument states that

where [the ballads] were collected and printed in one community, and were left untouched elsewhere, the later versions are usually inferior in poetic quality, and are frequently but faint recollections of the original story. This is partly due to the increasingly low average intelligence among those who transmit the ballads. . . . It must be remembered that the early ballad-group included individuals who, in a later and more literate time, would have been drawn into the stream of literary influence.<sup>10</sup>

Moore not only believes that the folk somehow did not prove themselves worthy enough to have been entrusted with the preservation of the ballads; he also thinks he knows where tradition went wrong:

As far as the narrative element is concerned, tradition worked nothing but corruption in the ballad, usually in one of the following ways: (1) The ballad loses its central action and the explanatory passages, and becomes a fragment dealing with a situation; (2) the gaps thus left are sometimes supplied by borrowings from other ballads, or less frequently, by a new improvisation; (3) by this new improvisation in part, and in all cases by errors of interpretation and the grossness of selection, the original becomes vulgarized; and (4) in the last stage of its oral currency, when it falls sufficiently out of general use to the nursery, it becomes a song for Children.<sup>11</sup>

Neither Henderson nor Moore is a man of the people. Their arguments have in common some logical fallacies. First, to suggest that the ballad only degenerates in tradition, is as much as to say that the mysteriously objective character of our best ballads is a quality they derive from their original composition. To regard that matter as settled would be to endow Henderson and Moore with knowledge out of the ordinary, since no one else is sure how the ballads were originated. Second, both men imply that the ballad as it first appeared was the ballad at its best, as we should like to have it today. But others feel that "it is not unreasonable to suggest







that three centuries before 1550 were consumed before the transition from the unidentified parent form or forms to the ballad as we know it was accomplished."<sup>12</sup> Now if any sort of communal recreation can be credited, the likelihood of the ballad springing to life as a polished literary work is small. But even if one postulates individual composition, there is no particular reason to expect a jewel of a ballad from a minstrel. The individual is as well qualified to write trash as any throng.

But whether the ballad has an individual or a group behind it, research has shown that it is, in fact, often changed for the better when it is left for some time in popular tradition. It is, in fact, the conscious "meddler" in the later history of a ballad who causes its deterioration because he is unqualified to write in the popular way. "If folk song were the mere wreckage of such music as was formerly composed by the sophisticated and literate, the collectors of our time might indeed have found beautiful things; but they would certainly not have found beautiful things in the making, variants so good that they deserve perpetuation, melodies so much alive that they are still leading singers to experiment and change."<sup>13</sup>

The suggestion is that we are sometimes, at least, better off to have the ballads as they were collected in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (except for historical considerations) than we should have been were they fixed in print shortly



after their composition. Why is this so? Tristram P. Coffin's study of "Mary Hamilton and the American Ballad as an Art Form" may provide some answers. According to Coffin the life of the Anglo-American ballad can be charted something like this:

(1) The poem, created by an individual, enters or is retained in oral tradition. The poem has three parts: an emotional core,<sup>14</sup> details of action, frills of a poetic style that are too "sophisticated" for the folk. . . . (2) This is the ballad stage. The frills of subliterary style have been worn away by oral tradition; some of the action details have been lost. . . . (3) In this final stage the ballad develops in one of two ways. Either unessential details drop off until lyric emerges, or essential details drop off until only a meaningless jumble, centered around a dramatic core, is left.<sup>15</sup>

Though Coffin's theory involves assumptions that are not demonstrable (that the ballad was composed by an individual, that it had certain identifiable characteristics at birth), it does have the advantage of anticipating both refinement by the folk (in the second stage), and degeneration (in the third stage). But more important is the implication that "the ballad stage" is when the folk "selects" what it wants to retain in oral tradition.

A comparison of the ballad with the romance may demonstrate how well qualified the folk is to select. The romance, which invariably "explains" motivation, plot and all the "frills" which the ballad lacks (and does not need) has significantly declined in popularity, or has been absorbed into a genre like the novel. The ballad, on the other hand, retains a considerable measure of its early currency. Whether one wishes to endorse the romance-to-ballad theory or not--to do so would suggest that the ballad is in many ways an





improvement on the romance--comparison of the two genres indicates that the ballad is anything but degenerate literature. Entwhistle's analysis of the Tristram story in romance shows how the ballad treatment is superior:

Precisely why Tristran and Isolt should be lovers, yet unable to marry, requires knowledge of many attendant circumstances in the prose romances. One must know about the love-drink; that Tristran wooed on behalf of Mark and was honor-bound to deliver Isolt; that there was no question of taking her away by force, and that there were quarrels and reconciliations and moments when secrecy seemed no longer possible. Not so in the ballad.<sup>16</sup>

The ballad preserves the most important part of all this.<sup>17</sup> Coffin calls it the "emotional core"; Entwhistle describes the remnant thus: "In the Tristran story there is one scene of paramount interest; Isolt dying in heartbreak stretched on the corpse of Tristran. In the ballads on the subject, this scene takes precedence over all others."<sup>18</sup> By limiting its scope, the ballad gains in concentration and emotional power, qualities which the romance generally lacks. These features of balladry at its best are found, to take a typically English example, in "Sir Patrick Spens" (58). The subject of the ballad is the drowning at sea of the valiant Sir Patrick and the Scots lords; its minimal detail consists of little more than the emotional atmosphere surrounding the catastrophe. The fact that many ballads as admirable as "Sir Patrick Spens" are to be found is eloquent testimony of the ability of the folk to select what is best in ballads.

Of course one must beware of oversimplifying Sharp's varia-



tion-selection formula. The many variants of a single ballad, and the many treatments of a single theme show how complex the whole business is. For instance, "no analysis could possibly reduce to order the central theme [of "The Twa Sisters" (10)], or disentangle what is accretion from what belongs to the original story. Yet the fact remains that a large number of the versions are excellent, each in its way, and impress us almost equally by the pathos with which they invest the tale."<sup>19</sup> The "multiplicity of admirable versions," moreover, makes it "impossible to make a composite ballad [in many cases] without leaving some stanzas over."<sup>20</sup> There would have been no surplus of "good" stanzas or even good ballads, of course, if, as Moore and Henderson wished, ballads had never entered oral tradition.

Sharp's positive attitude towards oral transmission, and the development of a ballad by selection and variation applies to the tune as well as the text. Sharp compares the process of communal re-creation of melody to the creative process by which more conscious art is evolved: "The successive forms, through which a melody passes in the mind of a composer, correspond to the variants of a folk song. Both sequences represent successive attempts to consummate the expression of some ideal, consciously or unconsciously preconceived; in both cases they record the stages in a process of evolution."<sup>21</sup> Whether or not one is quite as impressed as Sharp is by popular improvement of melodies, he cannot fail to realize the significance





of recorded improvements, by variation, of the tune of a genre like the ballad, which is so intimately connected with its text. Some of Sharp's finest work was done in the area of ballad musicology.

He records the fact that the folk singers of his experience are concerned more with the words of a folk song than with the music, which he thinks exercises a more unconscious appeal:<sup>22</sup> "Manifestly, if the singer is unconscious of the tune that he is singing, any variation that he may introduce will be unconscious and unpremeditated also."<sup>23</sup> Unconscious and unpremeditated changes in a tune, however, are not necessarily corruptions. Sharp finds exceptional singers like Mr. Henry Larcombe whose alterations "aid very materially the evolution of the folk song." Though "the variations of the ordinary folk are comparatively trivial,"<sup>24</sup> there is no reason to suppose that they would fail to recognize a superior version when they heard it.

Two of many sources of musical variation are adaptation of an old tune to new words of slightly different meter, and change of mode. Miss Anne Gilchrist tells what typically happens in the former instance:

A new ballad coming into currency would not be sung to a new tune. The singer often brings to the new words some tune he already knows, and so makes them acquainted. Often the tune brings with it some of the words--perhaps only the refrain--the singer already associated with it, which may have no relation whatever to the new ballad. The contact of tune and words results in the adaptation of one to the other. Sometimes one, sometimes each insensibly yields something



of its rhythm, or stretches or contracts its line or melody, and before long the pair may settle as it were into place, and the old tune may be half-way towards a new one.<sup>25</sup>

Hodgart agrees with Sharp that communal recreation operates similarly for words and tunes (in the direction of improvement), but he feels that the process can be better illustrated by the tunes. And Phillips Barry's interesting description of the effect on a tune of a change of mode, may prove Hodgart right. Barry describes his discovery of two tunes of the same ballad, each different, though both admirable:

One of the happiest experiences of our field work in the northwest was on the occasion when two folk singers, fellow townsmen and near neighbors, sang for us their respective versions of our favourite ballad of the wood, "Lost Jimmie Whalen." There were differences between the two texts but far more significant differences between the two sets of the air--one of the loveliest in American tradition anywhere. The singer whom we shall call Mr. A. sang a set in the Dorian mode; the traditional background of his version is demonstrably Canadian. Mr. B. sang a mixolydian set, superficially seeming a distinct air. When, however, the two sets are collated note by note, their descent from a common original is perfectly clear, while the transformation from a Dorian melody to a mixolydian is traceable through a variation, three times repeated in the course of the ballad as sung by Mr. A.; this variation is of a kind that, to the extent to which it stabilizes itself in memory, so breaks up the tonal associations of Dorian melodic structure that it cannot fail to affect the form of the air as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

Besides the passive influence of "continuity" on the ballad, then, there are two aspects to communal re-creation, aspects which Sharp designated by the evolutionary terminology of variation and selection. Variation, when it is beneficial, is largely the work of individuals in the popular tradition, who consciously or unconsciously alter the tune or text of a ballad so that it improves.







Variation may, of course, have a detrimental effect where error is concerned, but indications are that the ballad in oral tradition does not solely degenerate as was once thought. Selection refers to the process by which the folk, by selecting what peculiarly appeals to it, makes the ballad distinctive. And what appeals to the popular mind is not always the low and vulgar: "The traditional style employs only the most general situations and the most spontaneous motifs. Its products must be accepted by all men as part of their imaginative experience, and if the original poem has not achieved this universality, the subsequent variations by innumerable singers will pare away what is unusual."<sup>27</sup>

It may be, as Gerould suggests, that the fact of communal re-creation makes the old quarrel between the individualists and the communalists superfluous. But it seems to do more than that. At the same time as it cuts Gummere's critical ground from under him, by establishing that collective origins in the primitive sense need not have been an originating factor, it seems to assign importance to the individual only insofar as he participates in the spirit of a group. Only individuals in the popular tradition are qualified to make changes which the folk as a whole will select for perpetuation. In the final analysis, the ballad cannot be seen as anything but a collective genre, a genre in which the individual plays a much less important part than he does in the literature of art.



## CHAPTER V

### THE BALLAD AND RITUAL

Since the ballad is an unconscious, collective genre, it was probably inevitable that people like Gummere should try to connect it with ritual, which is also unconscious and communal. It is in the ritual dance that Gummere envisions the creation of the ballad:

Songs and dances of the May go back to immemorial ritual and ceremonies in worship of nature and the revival of her powers in the springtime; a Russian scholar, who has studied the ritualistic songs of his race, comes to a theory of poetic origins embraced in the formula of "ceremony to song, song to poetry." It has been maintained, furthermore, that the primitive German hymn was like that song of the Arval Brothers in Rome,--cries to the god in repetition and refrain sung by a dancing throng. Chorals of labor, too, rise everywhere in medieval life, and still exist in survival. In fact, nearly all emotional expression was once public and concerted in its utterance, and loved the rhythmic fall of feet as well as of voice; but the obviousness and range of this rude song forbade its preservation except in the traditional way.<sup>1</sup>

The ballads, to Gummere, seem to be vehicles for the preservation of "public and concerted" emotional expression. And Gummere was not the last to feel this way. Leslie Shepard, writing on broadside ballads in 1962, tries to connect the ballads directly with ritual: "Long before the ballad form itself there were epics, sagas, minstrelsy, folktales, myths and rituals that carried the same essential story in forms appropriate to the folk culture of their times.





It is in this primal dancing and singing of the mysteries that the ballad had its birth."<sup>2</sup> The pitfalls in the path of anyone who tries to trace the ballad back to primal dancing and singing were discussed in Chapter Two. It is just not possible to demonstrate any gradual development of ballad form from primitive to medieval times. But if Shepard's statement be interpreted in its widest sense, to mean that the ballad, like all literature, has a ritual somewhere in its background, then perhaps his opinion is valid, because there is evidence that primitive ritual was at least partly responsible for the beginning of song and thus, indirectly, for the first literature. C. M. Bowra, the famous classical scholar, puts it this way:

Song arises from rhythmical action and owes to it some of its most important characteristics. Such action is older and earlier than rhythmical words, which are added. . . . It looks as if song comes into existence when a rite based on rhythmical movement calls for something more explicit to make its purpose plain, and this need is satisfied by appropriating words from the art of prayer, which in its essential purpose is not very far removed from dramatic actions intended to influence gods and spirits.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the reasons for, and the conditions of, the appearance of ritual, it does stand in the ancestry of literature, if only as a related imaginative phenomenon, and the ballad, as a form of literature, has at least this remote connection with ritual.

Though the communalists' attempt to demonstrate the immediate association of ballad and ritual has been found lacking as a theory of ballad origins, a detailed examination of the ballads does convey the impression that ritual has been a more profound influence in



balladry than it has recently been thought. Continuing reaction to the communalists has, of course, made it hard to be objective about things like "primitive survivals," and a study of ritual-ballad relations must bypass the objections of people like MacEdward Leach, who says "the theory that the ballad was engendered by ancient rituals, vegetation ceremonies, primitive rites" is "fantastic," "a theory which not even tradition excuses."<sup>4</sup> Such a theory is not entirely endorsed here. Chapter Two showed why it would be impossible to hold such an opinion without serious reservations. But, on the other hand, a completely negative view like Leach's ignores two things. One is that the popular tradition in the medieval age is a relatively primitive one, and thus is not entirely remote from ritual. The other thing is that there are things in the ballads which are generally primitivistic and, in some instances, specifically ritualistic in character.

It can be shown that physical life in the Middle Ages, at least in the North Country, which is generally believed to have produced the best ballads, was of an almost primitive hardship, that medieval man lived in daily dread of the elements, and that, partly in consequence, the turning points of the year, May and October, were still important enough to be greeted with considerable ceremony. Partly as a result of these physical conditions, medieval man's psychological makeup shows many facets which are more closely related to the primitive than to the modern.





(Of course, the line between primitive and modern, in the analogous terms of the unconscious and the conscious, is in some respects a continuum.) It will be demonstrated that the unconscious part of the medieval psyche was very easily reached in comparison with that of the modern. To this point Chapter Five will have been concerned with matters external to the ballads, while the atmosphere of the period in which they were probably composed is being established.

The ballads themselves are full of folkloristic or primitive motifs which often seem to be merely haphazardly scattered remnants of former beliefs. As Gordon Gerould says, "our ballad singers of the past few centuries have not been a primitive people, in the anthropological sense, or even pagans, but they have kept a residue of very ancient lore."<sup>5</sup> This residue, together with other more obviously patterned or formulaic remnants suggesting ritual will comprise the latter part of the chapter.

One of the best ways to explain why the ballads could be ritualistic, then, is to discuss them in the context of the medieval age which often seems to have a good deal in common with primitive times. Remembering that the ballads probably originated with the common people, and that they were certainly preserved and handed down by them, it is important to know the conditions of an ordinary medieval life, which was anything but secure, as G. G. Coulton shows: "Happy as the more well-to-do medieval peasant might be in the possession of his own little holding, the majority lived



always on the edge of an abyss into which a single bad harvest might, and a succession must, precipitate them."<sup>6</sup> And this statement is supported by the information that the population of England increased only at about 0.147 percent per annum from the Conquest to the Reformation.<sup>7</sup> A much higher increase would be expected if there had not been fundamental difficulties in obtaining such primary needs as food and shelter.

Since we know that parts of Europe were culturally quite advanced at a relatively early date, primitive characteristics must have lingered longer in certain areas than in others, just as pockets of oral culture remained in Appalachian America long after the rest of the country was "civilized." Willa Muir, in her book, Living With Ballads, makes the somewhat surprising statement that only in 1713 were the farming people of North Eastern Scotland led out of the Middle Ages, when one Alexander Grant of Mony-Holland introduced the use of turnips as a field crop for feeding cattle.<sup>8</sup> Until this time these people had been subject to much the same physical conditions as Coulton mentions above. Clearly the Middle Ages did not end at the same time everywhere in Britain, and it is significant that the northern areas were apparently considerably later than the south of England. Mrs. Muir realizes the importance of this conclusion for balladry: "If the farming populace in the North-East of Scotland were only just emerging from the Middle Ages in the early seventeen hundreds, it would go far to explain why





Child said that the best Scottish ballads came from the North, and why M. J. C. Hodgart has said that the Scottish versions have a richer content of folk beliefs and pagan survivals."<sup>9</sup>

This northern country, the lowlands or "debatable land," was a wild and turbulent area during the Middle Ages and later because of the border raids and family feuds occasioned by ill-suppressed feelings of violence. The great families, who were particularly guilty of excessive lust, greed and violence, took little note of the peasant who, as a result, often suffered from conflicts he neither shared nor understood. The tragic interpretation of life represented by many ballads no doubt derives from the first-hand experience of a cruel existence.

The testimony of a certain Joseph Taylor, writing about Edinburgh in 1705, makes even that city seem incredibly medieval: "Every street shows the nastiness of the inhabitants, the excrements lye in heaps, and there is not above one house of Office in the Town, which may not improperly be called a house of Office itself. In a Morning the Scent was so offensive, that we were forc't to hold our Noses as we past the Streets, and take care where we trod, for fear of an accident to our heads."<sup>10</sup> If Scottish cities were so backward in the early eighteenth century, it is not hard to imagine what must have been the condition of isolated rural areas.

The physical hardship undergone by all but the comparatively well off, then, seems incredibly primitive by our standards. And,



as we should expect, the people reacted to their environment in a primitive way. For instance the changing of the seasons was ceremoniously marked with concern and apprehension, much as it had been in ancient times.

We might expect a people whose lives were so closely related to the natural cycle to be psychologically open to many of the same influences which generated ritual and mythology in their primitive forbears. At least we should be prepared to find that pagan beliefs were "in the air," so to speak, although a certain amount of Christianizing, and civilizing had already taken place. A study of the psychological climate of the Middle Ages tends to confirm what was suggested by the physical conditions--that medieval practises and customs do indeed reveal a rather significant primitivistic content.

Primitive superstition, of course, was rampant, as we can see from Coulton's account of medieval medicine: "Some sort of ceremonial was generally considered a necessary part of all medicine; and. . .while one patient would sing Psalm XVI, drink his draught out of a church bell, and get a priest to say a prayer over him at the conclusion, others, again, had a greater faith in the frankly pagan leechcrafts which abounded."<sup>11</sup> The question of the relationship of the pagan to the Christian in medieval times, which Coulton's statement mentions, is important for our purposes. The study of Christianity's gradual insinuation into the place formerly occupied in the mind by often analogous pagan practises, is





an interesting one.

Northern Europe, and Britain in particular, was the last European area to be Christianized, a fact which perhaps explains why so many medieval "Christian" customs seem more pagan than Christian in character. The fact is that Christianity built, whenever possible, on pagan foundations, so that religious principles overlaid and supplemented obviously pagan customs, in much the same way that Jane Harrison finds the Olympian gods of Greece to have replaced earlier chthonic deities.<sup>12</sup>

It is a well-established tradition, says Lewis Spence in Myth and Ritual in Dance, Game and Rhyme, "that after the conversion of the Saxons in England the Christian Church adopted, with certain modifications, quite a number of ancient rites and ceremonies of both Saxon and British origin, which it regarded as comparatively harmless."<sup>13</sup> This interesting chapter in the history of the Catholic Church sees its authorities desirous of assuring their success in Christianizing the British by advocating the alteration rather than the replacement of primitive beliefs and practises. "At how deep a level it operated can be seen in medieval legends of the saints. Here we are back in the archaic world of fable. Ravens and greyhounds brought food to the saints in the wilderness; lions recognized and submitted to the power of holiness; flocks of birds sang hosannas at commons."<sup>14</sup>



The quasi-pagan character of medieval Christianity is identifiable in the realm of church ceremony, as well as in the world of hagiography. Coulton records this account of the consecration of a new church:

The bishop approaches from the church-yard, followed by all his clergy but one. That cleric is posted within the church 'in ambush' (quasi latens). The bishop smites three blows upon the door with his staff; and then the anthem is struck up: 'Lift up your heads, o ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.' Then comes from within the question, 'Who is the King of Glory?' and the reply follows: 'The Lord of Hosts, he is the King of Glory.' With these words the 'ambushed' cleric opens the doors and slips out, quasi fugiens, as an expelled power of evil, to join the procession.<sup>15</sup>

A more amusing instance of the pagan-Christian dualism encouraged by the church is the excommunication of animals. Coulton paraphrases the celebrated legist Chassenée, in his book De Excommunicatione Animalum Insectorum: "Since. . .caterpillars and other rural pests would simply laugh at a condemnatory sentence from the ordinary courts, let us use the weapon of Canon Law; let us strike them with 'the pain of anathema, for which they have greater fear as creatures obedient to the god who made them.'" <sup>16</sup> Nowadays, of course, we know that not even the invocation of anathema will wipe the smirks from the faces of those caterpillars who have successfully defied the ordinary courts. The point is, of course, that even well-educated medieval persons have not escaped primitive ideas of human-animal identity.





The church was compelled, for its own good, to tolerate a large number of heathen customs which only slowly began to take on a superficially Christian semblance. Among these were festivals grouped around the main turning points of agricultural life, of which there were basically two: one at the beginning and one at the end of winter. "These heathen festivals were often concerned, as is common in the primitive mentality, with some compulsion exercised on the god."<sup>17</sup>

One of the most common forms of entertainment in medieval times, a form that was certainly more than tinged with heathenism, was the dance, and the dance was one of the primitive survivals that the church did not hesitate to castigate at every opportunity. The church considered dancing the pastime of the devil. Perhaps that explains its universal appeal. At any rate, try as it might, the church made few inroads on the popularity of dancing.

The annoyance of this habit to the church may be amusingly illustrated by this story:

Before the close of the twelfth century, as we are told by Gerald of Wales, the folk were accustomed to sing as they danced in the churchyards. In the Gemma Ecclesiastica Gerald tells the story of a parish priest in Worcestershire who had been kept awake all night by these churchyard dances so that when he began the early morning service, instead of the usual "Dominus vobiscum," he startled his congregation by singing the refrain which had been ringing in his ears, "Swete lamman dhin are." So great was the scandal caused by this slip that Bishop Northall (1184-90) pronounced an anathema upon any person who should ever sing that song within the limits of his diocese.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of the evidence furnished by the dance, of course,



is that it has ritual connections. According to Lewis Spence, the original significance [of the ritual dance] is in a state of comparative breakdown, something between the dance of barbarous ritual and that stage which may be classified as belonging to folk-dance--that is, a form in which the meaning of the ceremony has altogether been forgotten and is merely a mechanical reproduction of factors outworn and superseded by the articles of a later faith. In some of these dances of more cultivated peoples, however, the original faith is still paramount though the first intention of the rite is dim, or garbled in its significance.<sup>19</sup>

Whether or not the dance was a formative factor in balladry, and whether or not the ballads were actually danced, there can be no doubt either that the habit of dancing was widespread in the Middle Ages, or that the dance had primitive connections. Spence quotes one Canon MacCulloch to this effect: "'All medieval folk-dances were survivals of pagan ritual dances. . . . The passionate love of the folk for them made them obnoxious to the church.' They frequently took the form of wild and uncontrolled epidemic dancing, as at Aix-la-Chappelle in 1374, or at Erfurt in 1237, when the crowds who took part in them let themselves go in frenzy and delirium and 'were not sensible of their surroundings.'"<sup>20</sup>

The most common type of medieval dance was the carol, so named because of its accompaniment by the song which was considered as an influence on the ballad form in Chapter Three. A leader would sing the stanzas of the carol, and the whole company would reply with the burden or chorus. "The usual procedure [was] for the ring or chain to mark time in place during the stanza (or 'standing') and to revolve (always to the left or sunwise) during the general





singing of the burden."<sup>21</sup> As the ballad, "The Earl of Errol" (231) shows, the dancers might revolve in a ring:

There were four-and-twenty maidens  
A' dancing in a ring. (st. 16)

or in a row:

There were four-and twenty maidens  
A' dancing in a row. (st. 17)

At any rate, the sunwise turning of the dancers (which was insisted upon because the witches, whether they danced in a round or in a processional, were believed to move "widdershins," or counter to the sun's motion),<sup>22</sup> and the preservation of the dance in such clearly ritual forms as the May games and Morris Dancing, further argues its primitive derivation.

The Morris Dance, which owes its origin to sun worship and nature worship generally, perhaps preserves the form of a "slow processional up the mountainside to greet the morning sun, and the scenes of wild joy on the summit at the appearance of the source of light and life to the waiting worshippers."<sup>23</sup> The Morris Dance figures of King and Queen, Lord and Lady, or Mayor and Squire (which appear in the May games as well) no doubt represent the male and female principles in a rite which has strong fertility connotations. Mary Neal states, not unexpectedly, that "the fact that today the Christian festival of Whitsuntide is the most usual time for Morris Dancing in those places where it still survives is also an indication that the pagan ceremonial dance was transferred to the Christian



Church ceremonies in early Christian times."<sup>24</sup>

In view of all this evidence to the effect that Christian feeling was but a varnish over the securely rooted impulses of medieval folk, it should not be surprising to find, as we do, that primitive Dionysiac revels were not unheard of in the Middle Ages. In the twelfth century

a country man in the Rhineland built a wooden ship, out of sight in a forest, which was put on wheels and drawn about the country by men yoked to it. They took it to Maestricht, Tongres, Loos, even to Aix-la-Chappelle, greeted everywhere they went by great crowds joyously singing out of the towns and 'dancing round the ship far into the night.' Our informant is the monk Rudolf of St. Trond who, horrified at such a heathen recrudescence, left us this description: 'Under the twilight of dawn crowds of matrons having cast away all feminine shame, loosened their hair, leapt about clad in their shifts, two hundred dancing about the ship shamelessly. You might see one thousand people of both sexes celebrating into the middle of the night. When that execrable dance was broken off the people ran hither and thither making a noise as if they were drunk.'<sup>25</sup>

The ship was of the goddess Nerthus, a Germanic earth-mother which in ancient times was carried around in a springtime ritual procession. Another revival of ritual took place in 1282 in Scotland where a priest, presumably with a foot in the pagan camp, collected young girls to participate in the fertility rites of Priapus with him.<sup>26</sup>

The expulsion of the pharmakos, or scapegoat, in church consecrations; Chassenée's implicit assumption that insects, like humans, come into the world trailing clouds of glory; heathen ritualistic festivals and dances--all these things and more point to the fact that the primitive layer in the medieval psyche was much closer





to the surface than it is today, and that it was, in fact, capable of being brought to the surface from time to time. Today it takes a special knowledge of mass psychology, of the kind that Hitler possessed, to make a group act at the behest of its unconscious urges.

One of the reasons, then, why primitivistic notions cannot be altogether divorced from ballad criticism, is the relative primitivism of the Middle Ages themselves. Now to suggest that the medieval age was relatively primitive in a number of ways is not to envision a medieval Britain populated by naked savages. It is merely suggested that the gap between the modern age and the Middle Ages, with respect to the degree of civilization attained, is in many ways, greater than the gap between the Middle Ages and actual primitive times. If one may make an analogy between the progress of civilization and the increase of mathematical progressions, it seems that civilization moves according to the geometric, rather than the arithmetic progression, and that the great gulf in years between Neanderthal and medieval times is offset by a corresponding gulf separating medieval and modern periods. I repeat, however, that the primitivism of the Middle Ages, if indeed that is the right term, is only a relative thing. Today things like superstition and identity with the group remain a part of the human psyche, though they seem to be largely restricted by conscious, individualistic tendencies.<sup>27</sup>

Whether or not medieval people were aware of the primitive nature of their ritualistic actions is unclear. Probably they were



not, except intuitively. However, such matters as we have been considering may be attended with various degrees of understanding. The fact remains that in primitive times one occasionally hears of "heathen recrudescences," and discovers a much more primitive cast of mind than is generally discoverable today.

The ballads themselves, of course, must be the main source for material to support a ballad-ritual theory. The themes of the ballads represent the deeds and sentiments of persons governed mainly by what might be called "primitive" emotions. As a result we have all sorts of ballads concerned with violence, sex, murder, incest, and various combinations of these themes. It is not surprising that "later" ballads which shock modern sensibilities are toned down.<sup>28</sup> And this sort of repression is not confined to the ballads. It is felt, for instance, that the theories of solar and lunar mythology are the result of an analogous reaction to congenial subjects:

The revolt of the interpreters of mythology against such motifs as incest, murder etc., points to the actuality of the experience in the interpreter as well as the myth-maker, a somewhat painful recognition. This reaction impels the interpreters of the myths, for their own rehabilitation, and that of all mankind, to credit these motives with an entirely different meaning from their original significance. The same internal repudiation prevents the myth-creating people from believing in such revolting thoughts, and this defence was probably the first reason for the projecting of these relations to the firmament.<sup>29</sup>

Though we do have ballads which are victims of a similarly repressive process, many ballads still preserve folklore of a more primitive time. And, interestingly, the ballads resemble the medieval church





in their simultaneous preservation of Christian and Pagan impulses. In the ballads, however, the "pagan side of medievalism" is better represented than the Christian: "Even when they make mention of Biblical characters, ballads are not weighted with Christian or religious purpose. They are largely destitute of moral aim; the moral tag appended to some versions is a clear symptom of corruption."<sup>30</sup> The rather considerable amount of Christian material which does appear in the ballads, then, is subordinate to the pagan folklore both in significance and in imaginative appeal.

It is difficult to see any consistent pattern in many primitive motifs contained in the ballads, because of the fragmentary nature of their preservation. One of the most striking things about ballad folklore, however (and little mention will be made here of vast amounts of medieval folklore found elsewhere), is that it is "characteristic of the vagueness about categories that is so marked throughout traditional lore."<sup>31</sup> The inability to distinguish between areas of life which seem markedly defined to modern man, is characteristic of the primitive.<sup>32</sup> He fails to differentiate life and death, and considers a dream of a dead relative evidence that the relative still exists somewhere. He fails to separate himself from animals, plants and even inanimate objects so that his world is restricted by a system of totems and taboos which seems entirely artificial to us, but which the primitive could not escape. "Systematic thinking," says Mrs. Muir, "belongs to conscious life, while the



underworld of the imagination flows only from one episode to another without explicit connection, so that imaginative action is always ad hoc action."<sup>33</sup> For Mrs. Muir this fact explains why ballads need no logically connected narrative. Presently we are concerned with some of the categories of ballad folklore whose boundaries (if indeed there are any) merge into one another in typically primitive fashion.

The three basic types of supernatural creature in the ballad, the ghost, witch, and fairy,<sup>34</sup> fall into such ill-defined categories. While each has some exclusive characteristics, they all defy physical reality, and share many particular qualities as well.

The ballad ghost is little more than a "living corpse." It has no resemblance to anything like a modern spook and exhibits no particular proof that it is a ghost. As such it is seldom regarded with fear, but rather is accepted as "natural" by the ballad maker. The fact is that the ghost acts much as a man does, and is disqualified for inclusion in human ranks only by the technicality of death. The ballad makers often capitalize upon the resemblance of ghosts to humans by having the ghost do human things, with the difference that a supernatural atmosphere hangs about him. Finally, the ghost is revealed in the climax when he does something which shows that he is not of this world.

The habitation of the dead in the ballads seems to be the grave rather than some place corresponding to heaven or hell (although





the notion of an otherworld does come into play in ballads like "The Wife of Usher's Well"(79). The grave, as Andrew Marvell knew, is a confining place: there is no provision made for entertaining company:

There is nae room at my head Margaret,  
As little at my feet;  
There is nae room at my two sides  
For a lady to lie and sleep.  
("Sweet William's Ghost" 77)

The ghost, or the revenant,<sup>35</sup> as it is sometimes called, is restricted to the grave in the daytime, when there is no escape from the "channerin' worms" that torment him. The activity of ghosts is always nocturnal, and "visiting hours" end for them at cockcrow:

The cock he hadna crawd but once  
And clapped his wings at a'  
When the youngest to the eldest said,  
Brother we must awa.  
("The Wife of Usher's Well" 79)

Although the ghost is not an evil creature, the superstition that he must be gone to his grave at dawn probably corresponds to the ancient idea that the light of morning reveals the evil deeds done under the cover of night.<sup>36</sup>

The dead man is not active even at night, of course, unless he has some reason to stir. Prolonged and excessive grief over his death makes him feel unsettled, and he may return to chide the mourner, as in "The Unquiet Grave" (78):

'Oh who sits weeping on my grave  
And will not let me sleep.'



Punishment, or at least admonishment is a frequent cause of the walking of the dead. The ghost of Fair Marjorie subtly and sadistically recommends that Young Benjie (86) be severely dealt with:

'O ye sanna Boonjie head, brother,  
Ye sanna Boonjie hang;  
But ye maun pyke out his two grey eyes,  
An punish him or he gang.'

In "Proud Lady Margaret" (47) a ghost is disturbed by his sister's "pride an vanity"; Sweet William's ghost makes an unsuccessful attempt to gain its unfulfilled troth plight.

The ballad ghost, then, is really undistinguished by any significant difference from human beings, because the difference between the realms of life and death were not as clearly differentiated by the ballad makers as they are now.

The ballad ghost and the ballad fairy share certain characteristics. Like the ghost, the fairy seems to be of human size. Some stanzas of "Tam Lin" (39) are to the effect that the fairy can change size and shape at will, but Professor Child regards these stanzas with suspicion.<sup>37</sup> "The Wee Wee Man" (38) tells of a fairy of subnormal size. The fairy is distinguishable from humans mainly by its supernatural knowledge and power. The Wee Wee man can make himself invisible, for instance. And ~~generally~~ a good deal of the supernatural atmosphere that Keats so admirably captures in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is usually associated with fairy ballads.

The color green is associated with fairies as well as with witches and ghosts, though it is a favourite ballad color for mor-





tals' dress as well. Fairies are often accredited with great wealth. Allison Gross (35) tempts a mortal with

a sark of the saftest silk,  
Well wrought wi pearlesabout the ban,

and with "a cup of the good red gold." Wimberly terms the many references in balladry to riches beyond man's imagination as items which "enrich the ballad story and shine in sharp contrast to the dark fatalism of folksong."<sup>38</sup>

The principal fairy activity seems to be carrying off mortals, whether to be nursemaid to an elfin child (The "Queen of Elfan's Nourice" 40) or merely for amorous reasons. The elfin queen regrets the loss of Tam Lin, whom she has captured, because he was "the boniest knight/ In a' my companie." Like the ghost, the fairy performs its activities "at the mirk and midnight hour," the power of the fairy ending, moreover, at cockcrow. The fairy lives a much more pleasant life than the ghost, however. Its activities include dancing, hunting and riding. "Pleasant is the fairy land," admits Tam Lin, though he wants to return to human status. Perhaps he will be the "teind to hell." The fairies explain their system of tribute to Thomas Rhymer (37):

'Ilka seven years, Thomas  
We pay our teindings unto Hell  
And ye're sae leesome and sae strang,  
That I fear, Thomas, it will be yeresell.'

The fairies enjoy riding in procession, often on the black, brown and white horses, in that hierarchical order.<sup>39</sup> Combing the hair



is another favorite occupation. (In "The Laily Worm" 36 we have the unlikely scene of a "machrel" taking the head of a worm on its knee and combing the hair of the worm, presumably with some attention to careful grooming. This delightful passage, in the best ballad manner, is not destroyed by explanation except in the later versions.)

Like the ghost and the fairy, the ballad witch is an unspectacular entity. The sorceress, or, better, "worker in magic," has recourse to the black art only for her own private ends. There is nothing in the ballads like the flamboyant magician Merlin in Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. Almost without exception, the practitioners of magic are women.<sup>40</sup> The mother-son relationship in the ballads may even be somewhat diabolical. As it will be suggested later in more detail, Freud's principles hold good for most ballad relationships. In "Lord Randal" (12) and "Edward" (13), for instance, the son appeals to the mother (as nowadays one might expect) instead of the father, and in the latter ballad there is a strong hint that the mother has been an evil influence on her son.

The traditionally wicked stepmother is usually associated with evil practices. In "The Laily Worm" (36) the "ae warst woman/ The wardle did ever see" has turned her stepson into a worm and her stepdaughter into a fish. Allison Gross, equally wicked, is "the ugliest witch in the north countrie," Allison being, accord-





ing to Wimberly, among the most common witch names. She also turns a man into a worm to "toddle about the tree." Implied in all these ballads is the primitive power of the witch over the animal world.

The supernatural inhabitants of the ballads, then, share many of their characteristics, and probably evoked an atmosphere of mystery in medieval composers and listeners similar to that felt by the modern reader. The same mystery, and the same vagueness of boundaries (this time between human, plant and animal) attends the ballad manifestations of Frazer's "external soul." As Frazer pointed out, the primitive commonly believed in the existence of the soul after death, and in the transmigration of souls. This notion helps to explain the significance of many ballads which show two lovers symbolically united after death by a rose and a briar:

Lord William was buried in St. Mary's kirk,  
 Lady Margaret in Mary's quire;  
 Out of the lady's grave grew a bonny red rose  
 And out of the knight's a briar.  
 ("Earl Brand" 7)

The widespread idea that birds have the power of speech may have been responsible for the "bird-soul" in "Young Hunting" (68). The bird shows up in the usual ballad manner: the hero's sweetheart has given him "a deep wound an a sare" with her pen-knife. His death ensues, but his soul passes into a bird

That flew abon her head  
 'Lady, keep well thy green clothing  
 Fra that good lord's blood.'



The soul of Young Hunting, in bird form, will eventually denounce the murderess. A similar denunciation betrays the guilt of the eldest sister in "The Twa Sisters" (10). In this case the harp of a minstrel is strung with hairs from the murdered girl's head, and it sings in such a way as to expose the wicked deed. (The "hair-soul" motif is probably related to similar motifs in the Samson story, or the Greek tale of King Nisus.)

It is perhaps a more obvious conclusion, at least for a modern, that the soul resides in the blood since the loss of it so often coincides with the loss of life. Dr. Wimberly says: "Among the examples of blood magic are those of blood drinking ("The three Ravens" 26); catching the blood of the slain. . .to keep it from being spilled on the ground ("Lamkin" 93A); the belief that the corpse of a murdered man will bleed upon the approach of, or on contact with, the murderer ("Young Hunting" 68C); and indelible blood stains ("Babylon" 40)."<sup>41</sup>

The belief that a man's personality or spirit is bound up with his name is the idea on which several ballads turn, a strange power being attached to the name in much the same way as it was among primitive tribes.<sup>42</sup> According to this tradition the naming of the devil is the surest way to defeat him, as in "Riddles Wisely Expounded" (1). The magical power of names is also the motif of many fairy stories, such as "Rumpelstiltskin."

In the ballads we also find the ascription of personality to inanimate objects such as stones, weapons, ships and the like.





The custom of swearing on swords may have to do with Christianity because of the shape of the sword, but it may also derive from the belief that spirits reside in weapons generally. The sanctity of objects like the sword was what led to their being sworn upon. Says Robin Hood to the Sheriff (in "A Gest of Robyn Hode" 117, st. 202):

'Thou shalt swere me an othe,' sayde Robin,  
'On my bright bronde;  
Shalt thou never awayte me scathe,  
By water ne by lande.

Besides the various forms of related external souls, the primitive nature of the ballads is illustrated by several instances of transformation into plants, and into animal forms such as the deer, the hare, the wolf and the serpent. The woman-doe of "The Three Ravens" (26) is a famous case in point. Similarly Leesome Brand (16) is warned:

Be sure ye touch not the whyte hynde,  
For she is of the woman kind.

The idea which attributes spirits to trees, as to animals, and the idea of metamorphosis into plants are among the factors which contribute to the distinctive and symbolic nature of the ballad forest, or "green-wood." The hats of the Wife of Usher's Well's sons, for instance, are "o the birk" which grows at the gates of paradise. Hind Etin has some "mulberry wuds," and Lady Margaret suffers from trespassing in them. "Jellon Grame" (90) has a similar "silver wood." "The Cruel Mother" (20) probably reflects a superstition that a "guardian



tree" could facilitate delivery for a woman in the throes of childbirth:

She leant her back against a tree  
And there she endured much misery.

She leant her back against an oak  
With bitter sighs these words she spoke.

She set her foot against a thorne  
And there she had two pritty babes born.

The ballads often have paradisal birds, sacred plants and elfin music which, along with most supernatural folk, are usually associated with the greenwood. These things all suggest traces of the enchanting garden which, in other medieval literature, plays a very important part. (One thinks of the related garden of the courtly love tradition in "The Romance of the Rose," or in Chaucer's "Book of the Duchess".)

Though the list of primitive and folkloristic motifs in the ballads has by no means been exhausted, enough has probably been said so that it is now evident that there exists a whole complex of folklore motifs which largely contributes to the supernatural atmosphere informing the earlier ballads. These early ballads, of course, are those which may be assumed either to have been composed in the Middle Ages (or earlier), or to have passed through the hands of a folk who were sufficiently in tune with such primitive thoughts and beliefs as can be found in the Middle Ages, that they felt no impulse to rationalize and change the primitive and symbolic in the ballads. In this sense the ballads themselves,





like the external evidence given earlier, contribute evidence to the effect that in medieval times, primitive notions were "in the air," and that they must have been pervasive in all areas of life in the Middle Ages. The medieval, like the primitive mind, was not yet alert to the boundaries between spirit and matter which subsequent ages firmly established, and the very coexistence of supernatural with natural beings in the ballads is the best example of this blurring of outlines. The ballad ghost, witch and fairy walk in and out of ballads, as if through walls, without exciting any particular attention. They are taken for granted in a way that, for instance, the ghost of Hamlet's father is not. This is not to say that there is no wonder evoked by the supernatural presence in balladry. But it seems obvious that the medieval attitude differs radically from our own.<sup>43</sup> The same holds true for other motifs like external souls and taboos. Even if these beliefs exist in the ballads in a fossilized form, there is a great difference between a ballad audience which takes them for granted, and one which finds them striking enough to write books about them. Wimberly is an obvious example, but there are few ballad-lovers who, at one time or another, have not been intrigued by ballad folklore. And many--for example the communalists--were led by it to conclusions which have now been generally discredited.

It is not the intention here to revive the myth of communalism, though much of this chapter thus far has been inspired by a need to demonstrate that primitivistic notions in connection with



balladry need not be entirely ruled out by the fact that they originally led to a now unpopular conception of ballad origins. It is felt that the reaction against the communalists has perhaps not "cooled down" enough so that a more thorough (and objective) analysis of the relationship of the ballads (even if they are medieval phenomena) to their primitivistic content can be made. It has been for the purpose of making a small contribution in this direction that something of a general background has been laid. In the same spirit it should now be possible to go on to treat of some perhaps more important, because more consistent and considerable, primitive survivals than the ballad folklore cited above, this time of ritual patterns which have had their effect, at least thematically, on the ballads as we now have them.<sup>44</sup>

The patterns of ritual which survive in the ballads are, for the most part, partial. That is, they comprise only a part, or an aspect of a total ritual, and they are seldom found in any consistent pattern. In fact sometimes only a ritualistic motif is left. This is not always so, however, as the Robin Hood ballads demonstrate. The question which will need to be answered when the evidence has been reviewed, is whether the ritual patterns in the ballads are degenerate and partial because of their age, having been preserved in a ballad-like form from the beginning; or whether partially remembered patterns were incorporated in the ballads when they were composed in the Middle Ages. The evidence of the first





few chapters of this thesis suggests the latter conclusion, but it can do no harm to survey the primitivistic claims of ballad scholars in another light, one different from that of the second chapter on communalism.

The most striking suggestion of a ballad-ritual connection is found in the ballad-stories of Robin Hood. In fact, without the Robin Hood ballads, as concrete evidence of ritual influence, this study would needs be confined to the otherwise rather scattered and vestigial manifestations found in the ballads. But the ritual background of the Robin Hood ballads seems important enough to justify speculation that a more widespread effect was once felt in balladry. There will be more talk about such speculations when the nature of the present effect has been established.

Lord Raglan, in his study of The Hero, was probably the first to notice a consistent pattern or formula in the Robin Hood ballads which conformed to the age-old yearly competition between the old king and his youthful successor or, in other terms, between the old year and the new year.<sup>45</sup> The validity of the pattern was subsequently endorsed by others.<sup>46</sup> A considerable proportion of the Child ballads are concerned with the exploits of Robin Hood, whose popularity as a traditional British hero was hardly rivalled by any other such figure for many centuries. Kittredge summarizes the traditional conception of Robin:



Robin Hood is a yeoman, outlawed for reasons not known, but easily surmised, "courteous and free", religious in sentiment, and above all reverent to all women. He lives by the king's deer (though he loves no man in the world so much as his king) and by levies on the superfluity of the higher orders, secular and spiritual, bishops, abbots, bold barons, and knights; but harms no husbandmen or yeomen, and is friendly to poor men generally, imparting to them of what he takes from the rich. Courtesy, good temper, liberality, and manliness are his chief marks; for courtesy and good temper he is a popular Gawain. Yeoman as he is, he has a kind of princely grace, and a gentleman-like refinement of humour.<sup>47</sup>

The above description sounds like a wish-fulfillment image of the medieval yeoman or peasant class. And that image must have accounted for a great deal of Robin's appeal with the lower class, who always like to see those set above them as their betters bested by "one of them."

But Robin has another image which is in many details contradictory to that stated by Kittredge. Perhaps Kittredge neglects to make anything of this image because he regards the ballads based on it as "wearisome, sometimes sickening."<sup>48</sup> The theme of these ballads, as he says, is "Robin Hood met with his match," and there are a number of things about these ballads which justify a more thorough inspection of them than Kittredge seems to have made (perhaps naturally, since he prefers the more attractive portrait). In the first place it seems odd that a popular hero of the stature of Robin Hood should ever meet his match. Secondly, it is noteworthy that each ballad on this theme follows essentially the same formula: "Robin is alone in the forest; he meets with a stranger with whom he quarrels and is worsted: the victor is then acclaimed a member of the band."<sup>49</sup>





Moreover, the Robin Hood of these ballads is often out of character if Kittredge's account of him be taken as the norm. The "curteyse" outlaw, who supposedly protects the ordinary man, now "picks a fight" with a potter (121), a butcher (122), a pinder (124), a farmer (125), a tinker (127), a ranger (131), a beggar (132 and 133), a shepherd (135), and some pedlars (137), besides some others who might be considered Robin's more habitual opponents. In each case Robin is the instigator of the conflict, his opponent showing nothing but a peaceful demeanor until provoked.

One of the first clues which suggests where to look for an explanation of the seemingly contradictory character of these ballads, is the connection of Robin Hood with the clearly ritual May Games, which are associated with spring and vegetation rites. In the May Games, Robin represents the male principle of "King of the May," and his Maid Marion, the "May Queen," is the representative of the female principle. Raglan feels that Robin's name was a corruption of "Robin of the Wood" which would make him a kind of personified wood spirit of fertility, well qualified to preside over the May festivities.

Modern research has shown that the mating of Robin Hood and the May Games, and the association of both with the Morris Dance and the St. George plays,<sup>50</sup> was a relatively late occurrence. Frank Sidgwick believes that it took place between 1450 and 1500.<sup>51</sup> The distinct origin of the various poetic and dramatic forms of an



ancient ritual need not be an obstacle, though, since, whatever their origin, it was probably a consanguinity of spirit which associated them in the first place. W. F. Simeone considers the late connection of Robin Hood and the May Games as evidence of Robin's late evolution and association with English folk drama,<sup>52</sup> which is as much as to hint that the Robin Hood stories are non-ritual in character. But even if it were so, he reckons without the tendency of old impulses to acquire new clothing, in this case, perhaps, the Lincoln Green. At any rate, it need not be proven that Robin was traditionally a wood spirit for it to be possible that his name was associated with a fertility festival. From Robin Hood's association with various phenomena of ritual significance, we may take the suggestion that the nature of his appearance in the ballads argues a ritual background for at least some part of balladry. As Spence says: "Here. . . we are once more faced with the fashionable but very significant theory of the king whose waning vigour made it necessary to remove him or put him to death and replace him by another."<sup>53</sup> This pattern is identical with one which was ritually enacted from immemorial times, and which has left traces in the mythologies of so many countries. The Robin Hood ballads were perhaps based on a relatively late form of the ritual pattern, or a rationalization of it, since the old king (Robin) is not actually killed, as he was once, but manages to salvage his skin, if not his dignity. What we perhaps see is the old king, conscious of his intended fate,





forcing the issue, saying to the new king, his successor, in effect, "let's get it over with." Robin as old king is something like the gunfighter of the western movies who wants to settle down, but whose reputation causes younger gunfighters to come "gunnin'" for him.

The basic ritual pattern of old versus new which has been established, then, thus far seems valid. But if the explanation of the Robin Hood ballads up to this point has not erased doubts about the ritual in the ancestry of their hero, a closer examination of the eighteen or so ballads in question (including one "fytte" of the "Gest") may accomplish that purpose by revealing supporting evidence.

In at least three of the ballads for instance (131, 132, and 136), there are traces of joyous festivities attending the reception of the "new king" into the band, festivities which may have well greeted the cathodos or uprising of the new king, the rebirth of the new year:

What joy and dancing was in the greenwood,  
For joy of another mate!  
("Robin Hood and the Ranger" 131)

In "Robin Hood's Delight" (136) the festival lasts "for three dayes space."

Again, in three different ballads (128, 129, and 132), the man who bests Robin proves to be a relative either of Robin Hood or one of his men. Young Gamwell in "Robin Hood Newly Revived" (128) is Robin's cousin. In "Robin Hood and the Prince of Aragon" (129)



the opponent is Will Scadlock's father, and in "The Bold Pedlar and Robin Hood" (132) he is the "sister's son" of Robin's mother. Now this pattern may reproduce something of the motif of the "return of the hero," in which case it has rebirth connotations anyway, but whatever the case may be, the relationship between the new king and the old king is typically close, often that of father and son, and it may be this aspect of the old ritual which is preserved by these ballads.

Finally, what seems rather significant in the context that we find it, the ballad of "Robin Hood and Little John" (125) preserves evidence of the baptism of the fledgling king, the new year:

'This infant was called John Little,' quoth he,  
     'Which name shall be changed anon.  
 The words we'll transpose, so wherever he goes,  
     His name shall be called Little John.

Such an interpretation may seem contrived in view of the "rank seventeenth-century style"<sup>54</sup> of the ballad, but it does provide an explanation of the word "infant" which is consistent with what has gone before.

So one pattern at least--that found in the Robin Hood ballads--satisfies the requirements of a ritual background. There are at least two more patterns in these ballads which occur with considerable regularity. One is the rescue pattern, in which Robin either rescues some of his men, or is rescued by them, generally





from the clutches of his arch-foe, the sheriff. Another recurring configuration is the shooting match from which Robin Hood and/or his men always emerge victorious. Spence connects the archery in the Robin Hood ballads with

the last shadow of an enacted rite which narrated the life and adventures of a god or wood-spirit, and ended with the sacrifice of his human representative, who was despatched by a flight of arrows. Such a sacrifice frequently took place in Mexico at the festivals of the earth goddess and the maize god. The victim was tied to a framework and shot to death, the intention being to draw down rain by sympathetic magic, so that the crops might flourish. The flight of arrows symbolized the rainshower.<sup>55</sup>

Even Robin Hood's death, Spence feels, is "a more modern rendering of the myth of his death by gradual bleeding at the sacrificial stake in order that his blood might enrich the forest environment."<sup>56</sup>

Whether or not one accepts all the details of the Robin Hood ballads which seem to indicate ritual ancestry, it is thought that the pattern in its general outlines lends itself to the interpretation given it above. And if that interpretation may be considered established, it would seem to throw light on other occurrences in the ballads, the significance of which are thus rendered clearer. In other words, the presence of a ritual pattern in certain types of ballads--those of Robin Hood--might suggest that we look in other areas of balladry for similar outcroppings of primitive behaviour.

The sacrifice motif occurs in "Sir Hugh" (155):



She's led him in through ae dark door,  
 And sae has she through nine.  
 She's laid him on a dressing table,  
 And stickit him like a swine.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, Hodgart finds the killing in "Lamkin" (93) of a "sacrificial and ritual character," and he elaborates on the significance of such hints as have been found "of a dark and primitive layer of belief and practise," in such a way as to clarify what goes before in this chapter, and to give more examples:

The motif of the fairies' tribute to hell, paid at the end of every seven years, may also have some connection with the ritual murder of the divine kings made familiar to us by the Golden Bough. Frazer has explained how the fertilization spirit is thought of as embodied in the king; when his potency fails, he is put to death and succeeded by another. Later a substitute victim is chosen, who enjoys the privileges of a king for a short time before he is sacrificed. Finally, the actual slaying dies out and there remains only a Mock Death at an annual festival. Frazer has shown how this pattern at various stages of its evolution is found in many parts of the world. It would be hard to prove that the ritual murder of the divine king actually survived in medieval Europe, though that has been suggested. But folk memory is extremely tenacious. Sir Edmund Chambers has shown how the mummers preserved the pattern of the Mock Death, and possibly some such reality lies behind the motif of the fairies' sacrifice in "Tam Lin," and behind the curious ballad "Young Benjie" (86). In the latter the treatment resembles that given to the substitute king, that is royal luxury until the end of the sacrificial cycle.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly the baby in "Tam Lin" is stabbed with a "silver bokin," and a basin is "scoured" to catch the blood of Lord Wearie's wife. Geordie (209) is hanged with a golden chain. Sacrificial blood, of course, was thought to add vigour to the god and in much the same way it was thought that the god was strengthened by the expenditure of energy in games. There is no shortage of motifs like the above,





which are ritualistic in nature, and examples can be multiplied. But it is perhaps time to make some critical estimation of how much general significance attaches to the evidence of primitivism in the Middle Ages and the ballads as Medieval phenomena, and, second, the value of this sort of enquiry for studies in balladry.

As it was suggested above, some of the survivals in the ballads almost certainly owe their existence to a tenacious folk memory which preserves them in a fossilized form: vestiges of the belief remain but its significance is no longer recognized, and it is meaningless for all practical purposes except sometimes in a literary sense. For instance, the plants growing from lovers' graves seem more likely to derive from literary than anthropological motifs. (Many primitive survivals, of course, behave in a highly symbolic manner and both justify and explain their presence in the ballads in that way.) And besides the literary motifs which may come from other forms of folklore, such as the folk tale, and those motifs which are actually primitive but no longer understood, the ballads certainly contain beliefs resting on primitivistic (as distinct from primitive in the chronological sense) medieval practices which

were actually current at the time and place of collection. For example, the taboo on a man's presence at childbirth which is found in "Leesome Brand" (15) and its Danish analogues was certainly far from meaningless when these ballads were collected, and it has been reported as still active in country districts in this century. Many other motifs can be paralleled by current superstitions. A large number of primitive practices and beliefs persisted through the Middle Ages and into modern times in the remote districts of England and Scotland.<sup>59</sup>



Child comments on the ballad "Northumberland Betrayed by Douglas" (176): "Witchcraft was rife at the epoch of this ballad, nor was the imputation of it confined to hags of humble life. The Lady Buccleugh, the Countess of Athol and the Lady Foulis were all accused of practising the black art."<sup>60</sup>

The ritual patterns and traces in the ballads which it was the main business of this chapter to present, explain and set in their medieval context, are probably not on the whole related to ritual practises which were understood, though they were certainly practised in the Middle Ages (which in itself does much to differentiate the Middle Ages from the present age). That is to say, most of the survivals are, in a sense, fossils whose existence point to earlier times though, for our purposes, they indicate no more than a medieval psychological readiness to accept beliefs which have since passed away. Ritual is preserved in the ballads because their creators, and their transmitters were psychologically disposed to recognize the validity of ritual for them.

Of the two earlier mentioned explanatory possibilities, then, it now seems more likely that the ballad sprang to life as a genre in the Middle Ages, and naturally employed pieces of current beliefs which happened to be ritualistic, than that the ballad derived from a ritually inspired ur-form which ultimately became the ballad as we know it. Of course it is conceivable that either explanation could account for the fragmented and vestigial remnants the ballads





display. Whatever the case may have been, it seems clear that ritual is ultimately responsible for the thematic form assumed by many of the Robin Hood ballads, and that its influence may be detected in many other places.

In determining the importance of ritual in the ballads, something that must not be forgotten is that "we have. . .most admirable ballads, like 'Captain Car' (178) or 'The Baron of Brackley' (203), which deal with events of the later sixteenth century and contain no memories of an earlier age. Although one kind serves the folklorist as the other does not, they are equally important in balladry and equally useful in defining the status of the art."<sup>61</sup> Some ballads, then, certainly arose when the influence of ritual had ceased to be important, and this suggests that the entire genre might be more profitably discussed in terms of things other than the ritual which they have in common. The problem is further complicated by the elements of different cultural levels present in the ballads. The ballads, preserved for many centuries by the folk, naturally collected sometimes anomalous accretions which cause a confusion in the modern literary person unknown to the ballad singer. A cultural "bubble tower" (to borrow an expression from the oil industry) is needed to separate out the various cultural influences. The point is, however, that even if some form of ritual may be found in the older ballads, all ballads are not supernatural and folkloristic in character, and an inquiry like the present one is



restricted to a part of balladry only. Whatever one's preference in ballads, it must be admitted that the later ballads are as much a part of the genre as the earlier ones.

At any rate, the value of such a study as has here been undertaken would be greatly increased could a ritual influence be demonstrated to affect a larger number of the older ballads than it does. Perhaps there never was a pervasive influence. The existent evidence would encourage such a conclusion. Nevertheless, if one recalls the difficulty that was encountered in trying to separate and evaluate the various factors having some bearing on the ballad form, the difficulty of establishing the character and extent of ritual influence should not be surprising.

Though few will deny the value of studies in communalism, communal re-creation, literary and ecclesiastical matters, folklore and the like, at least insofar as the complex of forces they represent establishes a context into which the ballad may be profitably set, such matters are of a limited value to the student of literature. These "peripheral" studies are frustrating, if fascinating, since it is so difficult to deal in certainty with them.

The value of the ballads as literature, however, can be irrefutably demonstrated. Most of the matters which have been dealt with so far (excluding those, perhaps, of the fifth chapter) would be open and shut if their present obscurity could be cleared up, but the poetry of the ballads shares with all good literature the





quality of expansiveness, of meaning more than it says. And this way of looking at the ballad should reveal things about the ballad-makers and their products of a more enduring value than have the approaches hitherto adopted in this thesis.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE BALLAD AS POETRY

It would be interesting to know how much of present-day scholarly interest in ballads is due to the mystery which enshrouds the formation of the ballad genre, and the creation of individual ballads. The volume of ballad criticism inspired by, and concerned with, historical difficulties far exceeds the amount of attention given to the ballad as a form of literature. Perhaps the ballad has merely not attracted scholars capable or desirous of dealing with its poetry. At any rate, most books about ballads spend their time investigating such admittedly fascinating material surrounding the ballads as comprised the first five chapters of this thesis, and only include, sometimes as an afterthought, a chapter containing either random observations on the poetic effects of the ballads, or reflections on their stock devices. Ever since the time of Cecil Sharp there has been considerable agitation for a scholarly treatment of ballad tunes, long ignored in favour of the texts; but another imbalance yet requires correction. Very little ballad criticism can be found which closely scrutinizes the ballads themselves as individual poems containing motifs and themes





belonging to the imaginative history of mankind.

One of the reasons why no one has yet come to terms with the ballad as poetry may be that the student of the ballads as literature risks running afoul of critics like Bertrand Bronson who regard the ballad isolated from its tune as an inferior, emasculated entity. Bronson is the ballad musicologist who might be expected to carry the most authority, since he is undertaking the monumental task of supplying tunes for Child's collection. Like most ballad-music men, he is extremely hostile to the kind of ballad criticism which deals only with the texts. It is not hard to imagine what would be his reaction to a literary treatment of the ballads, in vacuo, so to speak. Bronson has some rather interesting arguments demonstrating that the texts, considered exclusively of the tunes, reveal only part of the "truth." For one thing, he says, "the units of thought [in the ballads] are. . . made commensurate with the four-stress musical phrase so generally typical of western [occidental] folk-melody."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, "the music. . . has governed the strategy of the dialogue in ballads. Typically, the whole length of the tune is allotted to a single speaker; so that question and answer, statement and reply, are in obvious parallel."<sup>2</sup> These facts, of course, are well to know when considering the reasons for, and the effects of, the organization of stanzas, and, even more particularly, the peculiarities of the parallelism in a large number of the ballads. But Bronson's



conclusions are even further-reaching:

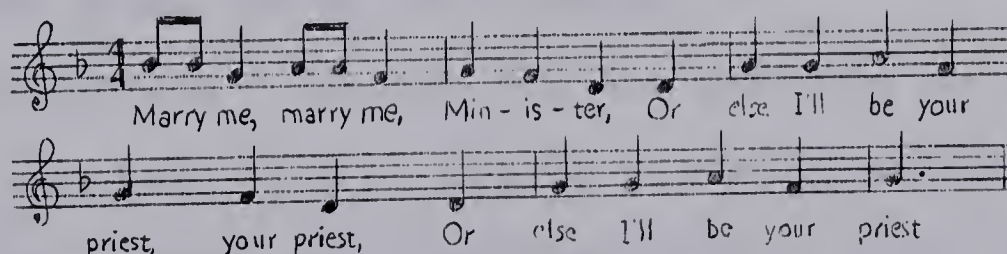
The musical conditioning of dialogue, set forth in melodic units as above described, has psychological as well as formal consequences. It leads to simple confrontations of agreement and disagreement, to the obvious balance of repetitional statement in formulaic reply and, at a deeper level, discourages the subtleties of indirect statement because these cannot be conveyed without interpretive assistance. The relatively impassive outlines of a folk tune suggest no latent shades of verbal meaning. Psychological implication, innuendo, irony cannot be heard in the straight rendition of a genuine folk-singer, and this is, of course, a source of strength as well as a limitation. Officious nods and becks, theatrical hints of a sub-surface understanding shared between singer and hearer, are an offense to that powerful impersonality which makes good folk-singing so uniquely impressive; they belong rather with the dramatic reading of words without notes which makes of the ballad an alien art.<sup>3</sup>

Bronson shows how the ballad, when sung, is inconducive to the literary device of irony which would occasionally seem to appear in the text alone:

In a version of "Eppie Morrie" (Child No. 223), the ironic threat of marauding Willie, demanding an instant marriage to his stolen and unwilling partner, is clear enough when read:

He's taken out a pistol,  
And set it to the minister's breast:  
'Marry me, marry me, minister,  
Or else I'll be your priest.'

But when sung, the accent refuses to fall on the emphatic your in the last line, and the point is lost in the hearing:







One perhaps need not agree that the stress falls on "your," but, to do Bronson credit, there are other occasions in which the text and the tune do seem contradictory. What do we make, for instance, of the murderous ballad with a lilting and high-spirited refrain such as is found in versions of "The Cruel Brother" (11) and "Babylon" (14)? Admitting that the tune sometimes seems incompatible with a literary interpretation of the text, however, is not to dismiss the validity of regarding the ballads, apart from their tunes, as poetry. The justification of poetic criticism may be postponed until it can encompass another sort of objection to ballad literary criticism.

John Greenway, in "The Flight of the Gray Goose--Literary Symbolism in the Traditional Ballad," has the following objection to literary criticism as it applies to the ballads:

The great difficulty is that literary symbolism--by which I arbitrarily mean those variously-numbered levels of ambiguity, dichotomies, paradoxes, and other manifestations of the metaphorical process designed to heighten the intellectual or emotional effect of the work itself, without reference to any outside situation--is where one finds it, lurking wherever image A seems to be incomplete in itself, apparently depending for full understanding on the identification of a subterranean concept B; and the traditional ballad, compounded as it is of many diverse elements, is, unhappily, rich hunting ground for the poetic analyst.<sup>5</sup>

Now Greenway's objection and that of Bronson are clearly of much the same stamp. Both of them try to combat subtlety of interpretation in a manner, particularly in Greenway's case, which has a strongly anti-intellectual smack. Bronson prefers the simpler to the more complex explanation of a ballad because its musical per-



formance seems to rule out complexity. And Greenway is unhappy with what he thinks is gratuitous symbolism, though symbolic interpretations of the kind that he questions would delight a more courageous critic. His conclusion that "symbolism is in the eye of the beholder," would seem to be based either on an uniliterary lack of sensitivity, or a failure to understand that there may be a great deal more in a work of art than its author, whether known or anonymous, thought he put there.

Greenway's article is inspired by a symbolic interpretation of the "fallow doe" in "The Three Ravens" (26) (by Brooks and Warren in Understanding Poetry) of which he says: "There are in [such] ballads sufficient examples to prove even to those not familiar with the patent animistic origin of the concept that the motif is not due to a poet's conscious cunning, but to a dimly remembered belief that the soul of a dead person may be reincarnated into an animate or inanimate form for the purpose of revealing his death."<sup>6</sup> Greenway's failure to appreciate the air of mystery evoked by this symbolic detail is further compounded by his preference for the late rationalization of the line in question, which reads: "there comes a lady full of woe." "No harm is done to the narrative," he says, "however much is thereby lost in the way of assumed literary symbolism."<sup>7</sup> The implication of these lines is that the later narrative, stripped of "extraneous" imaginative suggestion, is preferable to the early form of "The Three Ravens."





To say (with Greenway) that what in the ballads invites symbolic interpretation "represents a phase in the devolution of a ballad crumbling from primitive folklore into nonsense or burlesque,"<sup>8</sup> and to say (with Bronson) that the ballad tunes discourage the discovery in the texts of "latent shades of verbal meaning," is something like presenting a boy with a new bicycle and then telling him he cannot ride it. If not a destructive attitude, it is hardly a progressive one. Moreover, the validity of a symbolical interpretation based on patterns which now, as always, play upon the part of the mind below consciousness, can be demonstrated only if "rational" disbelief can be suspended. Chapter Five should have established that some response other than a logical one is required to accept what happens in the supernatural ballads.

In this chapter, which assumes that nothing can be gained by restricting its scope to suit Greenway and Bronson, something of a "new critic's" approach will be adopted to discuss, in turn, archetypal themes and symbolic details in the ballads, the poetic techniques of balladry and the unfortunate results of "unpopular" meddling with the genre. All these things can be explained in terms of the unselfconscious conditions under which the ballads were composed.

These conditions, which derive from the popular background of the ballads, are largely responsible for the problems encountered in determining ballad origins. But whatever the origin of the bal-



lads, as Chapter Four showed, the peculiar character of the ballads derives from its "communal transmission." The shaping of the ballad form having been kept in the hands of the folk's "group consciousness," it should be expected that the "popular" would have its effect on the nature of ballad poetics. To deal with this effect is to discuss popular or folk literature in general in connection with the literature of art.

It is the assumption of the critics of most literature that the individual lies behind the work of art (and Brooks and Warren seem also to assume that an individual is behind the ballads). Such a conception of the relationship of artist to creation seems natural in an advanced state of civilization, but there is some doubt as to its validity in the sphere of popular art, because it does not seem to have what Leslie Fiedler calls "signature": "I use signature," he says, "to mean the sum total of individuating factors in a work, the sign of the persona or personality, through which an archetype is rendered, and which itself tends to become a subject as well as a means of the poem. Literature, properly speaking, can be said to come into existence at the moment a signature is imposed on the archetype. The purely archetypal, without signature elements, is the myth."<sup>9</sup> In Euripides, says Fiedler, the signature first came into contact with the myth. Now if one sees the signature as a symptom of individuation, or civilization, it is clear that the ballads have more in common with primitive and collective society, than with





modern, individualized society. At any rate, Fiedler has really not got a category into which the ballads fit comfortably. They would seem neither to have "signature elements," nor to be purely myth, though they are often mythic and archetypal. Euripides' signature has been developed, Fiedler says, until writers like Joyce, Pound and Mann write self-consciously about archetypes, and the likes of Blake and Yeats invent their own myth systems. "Neither of these last two expedients can reach the popular audience, which prefers its archetypes rendered without self-consciousness of so intensive a sort."<sup>10</sup> If Fiedler means by "the popular audience," the ordinary reading public, then chances are he means that archetypes are not self-consciously rendered in bad literature. But popular literature in the technical sense, that is the oral literature of the folk, is far from bad literature, and it is difficult to apply the term "signature," derived as it is from writing, to an oral genre. An author there may be behind the ballads, but it is a collective author. The signature has been "written" over and over again in the same outlines so that it is now illegible.

Fiedler introduces the concept of signature, of course, in the process of justifying the interpretation of art by the character of its author. If one insists on finding the author behind folk literature, then it is obvious that the author must be the human ego in its collective role. There is a sense, of course, in which the human ego lies behind even the literature of art--insofar as every-



one shares similar basic experiences and impulses. But the individual author of the ballad as we now have it no longer exists. The ballad no longer bears his signature but that of humanity.

What is archetypal in the ballads seems to be the observable result of two things. One is that the medieval period, a relatively primitive time, was able to take advantage of an archaic undercurrent of feeling consisting of the most elemental human preoccupations. In this sense, of course, the symbolic and archetypal in the ballads is closely related to their surviving primitive motifs. The other explanation of the archetypal in the ballad is that it is a collective genre without conscious artistry directly behind it. It is perhaps a rather simple point, though a significant one, that artistry, and the capacity to appreciate it must at one time have been much more general than it has since become. The fact is that the folk seem to have had symbols ready to their hands to use unconsciously. And all members of society shared a common foundation, a creative unconscious, on which to build a common "art." Literature has never since been able to reach so wide an audience.

To properly account for the emotional effects created by the archetypal and symbolic in the ballads, criticism may profitably make use of psychological principles which have been applied with much success to the study of literature in general. Classical psychological theories, particularly C. G. Jung's doctrine of the collective unconscious, have been formulated from study of the human





mind which, in its creative mood, makes literature. And literature of value seems always referable to certain basic, indestructible patterns, the apprehension of which often goes a long way in explaining the imaginative appeal of poetry. Maud Bodkin, in Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, defines Jung's view of archetype (his name for these patterns):

The special emotional significance possessed by certain poems--a significance going beyond any definite meaning conveyed [Jung] attributes to the striving in the reader's mind, within or beneath his conscious response, of unconscious forces which he describes as "psychic residua of numberless experiences of the same types," experiences which have happened not to the individual but to his ancestors, and of which the results are inherited in the structure of the brain, a priori determinants of individual experience.<sup>11</sup>

The definition sounds as though it had been formulated with the ballads in mind since, much more than most other forms of literature usually discussed in archetypal terms, balladry is a collective genre, somewhat as archetype is a collective phenomenon. And the problems involved in relating the conscious and individual artist to his archetypal theme do not arise in balladry.

It is not possible, or even necessary, to explain many of the ballads archetypally, and even when a traditional pattern is present in a given ballad, it must be informed with enough imaginative energy to make it vivid. That a surprising number of ballads reward extremely close scrutiny, however, is at once a tribute to the creativity of the "folk," and the consequence of the fact that a great deal of the ballads' consistency of appeal may be put down to the pervasiveness of archetypal patterns. Though that which



strikes a responsive chord in the reader or listener is certainly unconscious, the reaction may often be traced to such images or patterns as, for instance, the death-rebirth structure in "Sir Hugh" (155) or the more widely-spread theme of the conflict between the generations. These are some of the things which will now be discussed, both in balladry as a whole and in individual poems.

Some patterns occur in many ballads, some in only a few, but there is at least one symbol, that of the "greenwood," which is so pervasive as to deserve special consideration. For one who has had considerable association with the Child canon, the greenwood comes to represent more than a place where trees grow, and it might be interesting to ask why. One notices, of course, that the greenwood is often the abode of fairies and supernatural creatures in general, and it soon becomes obvious that green is the most popular ballad color, particularly for clothing (cf. Robin Hood's Lincoln green). But the most important association of the greenwood is with childbirth, sexual matters, and fecundity in general. When a maiden "gangs" to the greenwood, there is little doubt that she is in danger, sometimes for her life, as in "Babylon" (14), where two maidens venturing into the woods to "pu' a flower," are killed by their brother; or in "Lord Thomas and Lady Margaret" (260) where Lord Thomas and his men hunt Lady Margaret through the forest like an animal. But it is more often the maidenhead than the life of a young thing which is in jeopardy. In "The Knight and Shepherd's Daughter" (110), a maiden is assaulted by a lustful knight:





He took her by the middle so small,  
 And laid her down upon the plain,  
 And after he had had his will,  
 He took her up again.

In "Crow and Pie" (111) the rape is more obviously associated with the greenwood:

He toke hur abowte the mydell small,  
 And layd hur downe vpon the grene;  
 Twys or thrys he served hur so withall  
 He wolde nott stynt yet, as I weene.

The greenwood is sought out by women about to bear illegitimate children, as in "Sheath and Knife" (16) in which a tragic situation unfolds:

It is talked the whole world over,  
 The brume blooms bonie and says it is fair  
 That the kings dochter gaes wi child to her brither.  
 And we'll never gang doun to the brume onie mair.

He's taen his sister down to her father's deer-park,  
 Wi his yew tree bow and arrows fast slung to his back.

Neither child nor mother will survive the ordeal of deer-park parturition. A similar situation is found in "Leesome Brand" (15), and in "The Cruel Mother" (20) who is found in the woods as the ballad opens:

She sat down below a thorn,  
 Fine flowers in the valley  
 And there she has her baby born.  
 And the green leaves they grow rarely.

The almost inevitable association of the greenwood with sexual matters makes it operate as a symbol of fertility and lust, probably even in ballads where sex is not an explicit theme. In this sense consider the implications of the assignation in the forest:



'In my bower there is a wane  
 An in the wane there is a wake;  
 But I will come to the greenwoods  
 The morn, for my ain true-love's sake.  
 ("Erlinton" 8)

or the courtship (with a flower burden):

A gentleman cam oure the sea  
 Fine flowers in the valley  
 And he has courted ladies three  
 With the light green and the yellow.  
 ("The Cruel Brother" 11)

It seems clear that the so-called "flower burden" in this and other ballads, like "The Cruel Mother," does not contrast with a tragically sexual situation, or merely fill in space, as has been suggested,<sup>12</sup> but rather that the sexual associations it derives from its connection with plants and the forest constitutes an agreement with the theme.<sup>13</sup>

What lies behind all this? It seems likely that the greenwood must have been the logical place to associate with sexual functions for a people to whom a branch on the May pole symbolized fertility. "Frazer has said that the bunch of foliage at the summit of the May pole is an earnest that we have to do not with a dead pole, but with a living tree from the greenwood."<sup>14</sup> Maud Bodkin suggests the relationship of this ancient pattern to the mind of the modern reader, and perhaps to the medieval ballad maker as well:

The bough whose significance Frazer and others have pursued through so many obscure places of myth and ritual, appears as representing the tree spirit, or, more generally, the power of renewal in vegetation and in other forms of life. The single festival to be set up





before one's door brings the spirit and power that is striving within every branch within the woods, to bless and strengthen the householder shut away within the dwelling. So, the blossoming branch offered to the dead as part of the ritual of interment, brings in symbol the power that reawakens forest and garden, to keep watch beside the corpse or accompany the freed spirit. These are half-formed thoughts or feelings that we can divine within the ancient customs through their dim presence also in ourselves<sup>15</sup>

The presence in the ballads of symbols like the greenwood is explained, since the ballad maker is unconscious of them, in the same way that we explain our present reaction to them, as "half-formed thoughts and feelings" held in common with all of human kind.

One of the things psychologists tell us is the common experience of everyone who grows up, is the peculiar and paradoxical conflict with, and attraction to, one's parents. To become an adult, we are told, the child must oppose the control of the parent (of the mother for the son, of the father for the daughter), a restriction to which the child is, in some ways, glad to submit. The conflict between the generations is an emotional pattern which lies behind many ballads, and usually the mother-son paradigm holds good. For instance, the son takes his mother's advice in "Edward" (13), and in "Burd Isabel and Earl Patrick" (257) with tragic results, Edward, significantly, has killed his father, and the implication is that he has done so on his mother's advice. In "Young Andrew" (48) a father turns his pregnant daughter from his door. Mother and daughter clash in "Lady Isabel" (261). The tyrannical step-mother's "malison" is felt in ballads like "The Laily Worm and the Machrel



of the Sea" (36). There are ballads in which the father or brothers pursue the daughter or sister who has been stolen from them, only to be killed by her abductor, a sequence of events for which there is a standard Freudian explanation:

The father who refuses to give his daughter to any of the suitors, or who attaches certain conditions difficult of fulfillment to the winning of the daughter, does so because he really begrudges her to all others, for when all is told he wishes to possess her himself. He locks her up in some inaccessible spot so as to safeguard her virginity. . .and when his command is disobeyed he punishes the daughter and her offspring with insatiable hatred. However, the unconscious sexual motives of his hostile attitude, which is later on avenged by his grandson, render it evident that again the hero kills in him simply the man who is trying to rob him of the love of his mother, namely the father.<sup>16</sup>

The ambiguous (attraction-repulsion) attitude to the parents may seldom be seen resolved in any one ballad. We see the rivalry in one ballad, the attraction in another. But the complex of attitudes to parents represented in the ballads no doubt derives from childhood experience. Everyone undergoes a change in his early image of father as protector to that of father as rival (corresponding to the view of mother as goddess which becomes mother as whore). The later attitude does not wholly replace the earlier; rather both co-exist in varying degrees in the psyche. This ambivalence in some ballads (as in "Earl Brand" 7B) takes the form of the heroine balking at the murder of her father by the hero, her lover, even though she has made no objection to the slaying of her seven brothers.

The murder of the father, of course, is at least psychologically a necessary step, even a heroic, Promethean step towards greater in-







dividual consciousness, and, on a broader scale, in the direction of civilization. The reader probably reacts to this important pattern in the ballads, as elsewhere, when the ego "finds itself in the hero, by reverting to the time when the ego was itself a hero through its first heroic act, i.e., the revolt against the father."<sup>17</sup>

Otto Rank's monomyth, based on this pattern, goes as follows:

The hero is the child of most distinguished parents; usually the son of a king--his origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. During the pregnancy, or antedating the same, there is a prophesy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to his father, or his representative. As a rule, he is surrendered to the water in a box. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds) and is suckled by a female animal or by a humble woman. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in a highly versatile fashion; takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, is acknowledged on the other, and finally achieves rank and honors.<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to find in at least one ballad, "The Lord of Lorn and the False Steward" (271), many details of the monomyth (the high birth, loss, rescue by shepherds, regaining of position, and revenge of the hero). "The Lord of Lorn," of course, is not a typical ballad. It is a narrative told in much the same fashion as an ordinary story, and does not lack connecting stanzas. Perhaps there is, in the comparison of "The Lord of Lorn" to ballads like "Edward," the germ of an explanation for the attenuated nature of the monomyth in most ballads where it occurs. Rather than developing the story in full, it would seem, the ballad captures the essence



of the relationships involved, which in turn subconsciously recalls the close relationship of each of us to all the events symbolized by the monomyth. This is another way of saying that the most memorable part of a good ballad is the emotional core.

Having discussed some larger patterns of symbolism in the ballads, it is now possible to turn to some individual ballads, those like "Sir Patrick Spens" (58) and "Sir Hugh" (155), which are effective largely through symbolical means. Though it will be evident that these ballads gain a great deal of their impact from symbolism (and to demonstrate that, of course, is the main purpose here) they will be rather fully analysed so that it is possible to see how some of the smallest details contribute to the unity of effect. These great ballads have implications which extend far beyond themselves.

"Sir Patrick Spens" opens, in the first stanza, with a commonplace which, though used elsewhere with no appreciable effect, here contributes a good deal in terms of what is to come:

The king sits in Dumferling toune,  
Drinking the blude-reid wine.

Wine in the ballads is generally "blood-red," but here the image has a sinister effect. The imagination must be brought into play, of course, to fill in the gaps between the narration of the first few stanzas. We assume that the "eldern knicht's" suggestion has been adopted because directly we learn that





The king has written a braid letter,  
 And signd it wi his hand,  
 And sent it to Sir Patrick Spence,  
 Was walking on the sand.

We mentally fill in the picture of Sir Patrick greeting the messenger, opening the letter, beginning to read it:

The first line that Sir Patrick red,  
 A loud lauch lauched he;  
 The next line that Sir Patrick red,  
 The teir blinded his ee.

This entire stanza is commonplace, of course, but it is poetically very effective because it informs us about Sir Patrick's state of mind, and because it precedes the stanza which, with its mention of the "ill deid don" to Sir Patrick, sends our thoughts back to the "eldern knicht" who, in retrospect, seems newly significant. Who is he, and what does he have against Sir Patrick? These questions are not answered, but the inkling we have that sir Patrick has been betrayed by someone who clearly knows the hazards of venturing out to sea "this time o' the yeir," considerably increases our admiration of the heroic and tragic acceptance of the man who knows what to expect, yet tells his men:

'Mak haste, mak haste, my mirry men all,  
 Our guid schip sails the morne:'

And his heroic resolve gains further significance from the apprehension of one of his men. The word "deadlie" which qualifies the expected storm is eloquent and prophetic here. Now follows the incomparable augury of disaster:



'Late, late yestreen I saw the new moone,  
 Wi the auld moone in hir arme,  
 And I feir, I feir my dear master,  
 That we will come to harm.

The imaginative effect of this stanza (which is the last we hear from Sir Patrick and his men) is undeniable, and probably derives from an apprehension of the moon image underlying consciousness.

Whether the power of the omen gains from some intuition of the moon as woman (which is one traditional view), or whether it suggests some other archaic supernatural attitude toward the moon having to do with its mysterious remoteness, the appropriateness of the image here, like that of the "ghostly galleon" in Noyes' "The Highwayman," cannot be justified in merely rational terms. The image in both popular and literary ballad was probably used because it has symbolic overtones. The use of the wrenched accent in "mastér" also has its effect by breaking the sound pattern established by "I feir, I feir," which could so easily be followed by "master deir."

Up to the end of this magnificent stanza there is little to quarrel about in the matter of effective presentation. But it was a brilliant decision, whoever made it, to omit narration of the fate of the ship. The feeling that there are unknown forces operating in this story, which was begun with the mention of the "ill deid," is continued by the mystery surrounding the sinking of the ship. The next thing we hear is the ominous circumlocution of the narration:





O our Scots nobles wer richt laith  
 To weet their cork-heild schoone;  
 Bot lang owre a' the play were playd,  
 Their hats they swam aboone.

There is something about this stanza which perhaps suggests an attitude on the narrator's part. The detail of the "cork-heild schoone" manages to suggest the picture of decadent and opulent passengers on board the ship of Sir Patrick Spens, who is braving dangerous seas on an errand that is none of his making. The grief that is felt in the ballad and which probably inspired it is for "guid" Sir Patrick Spens. There is no such approving adjective applied to the nobles. There is, in fact, more than a hint that the Scots lords got what they deserved in the faintly ironic image of their floating hats, and the almost sadistic lingering on the picture of their waiting wives whose fans and gold combs perhaps suggest the same kind of superfluity as do the "cork-heild schoone" of their men.

The ending of "Sir Patrick Spens" is one of the most powerful in balladry:

Haf owre, haf owre to Aberdour,  
 It's fiftie fadom deip,  
 And thair lies guid Sir PatrickSpence,  
 Wi the Scots lords at his feit.

There is little doubt that the power of this stanza, like the power of the whole ballad, has something to do with an intuitive perception of the symbolic value of the sea. The sea has attracted all sorts of writers to make use of the awe in which man stands of it. The sea is



powerful, largely an unknown quantity, and entirely independent of man. The reader feels the dread conveyed by the storm and the sea early in the poem, a feeling to which traditional and symbolic conceptions no doubt contribute, and, his intuitive fear of the sea having been justified, the logical ending of the ballad is a kind of summation of this fear, which places Sir Patrick Spens somewhere in the mysterious depths.

"Sir Hugh" or "The Jew's Daughter" (155) is another ballad which stands up to concentrated analysis. The ballad is straightforward in the first four stanzas. "Sweet Sir Hugh," playing at ball with his four-and-twenty cronies, kicks the ball through the Jew's window. The Jew's daughter refuses to throw it down "till up to me come ye." Hugh answers:

'How will I come up? How can I come up?  
How can I come to thee?  
For as ye did to my auld father,  
The same ye'll do to me.'

At this point the imagination is stimulated. What the Jew's daughter has done to Hugh's father is unknown, nor does the ballad bother to elaborate. But we can be sure it was such as to give him (and us) cause to dread the Jew's castle, and this dread follows him as he enters therein. In stanza six the Jew's daughter takes on the aspect of the archetypal temptress, or the image of woman with emphasis on the negative side of her ambiguous nature:

She's gane till her fathers garden,  
And pu'd an apple red and green;  
'Twas a' to wyle him sweet Sir Hugh,  
And to entice him in.





The words "wyle" and "entice" leave no doubt that the Jew's daughter is a Circe-figure. The image of the "dark door" through which she leads Hugh to his death contributes to the supernatural atmosphere of the ballad, which perhaps engages our attention because of its relationship to the archetypal pattern of the loss of innocence of which Hugh's "sacrificial" death is in some sense symbolic.

The bleeding to death in "Sir Hugh," conventional though it is, takes time in description as in real life. We have something of a sense of duration in the following stanza:

And first came out the thick, thick blood,  
 And syne came out the thin,  
 And syne came out the bonny heart's blood;  
 There was nae mair within.

The detail of "Our Lady's well" into which Hugh's lead-weighted body is thrown, is thought to have been added later in the history of the ballad. It may be an accretion from the literary treatment of the same theme in Chaucer's "Prioress' Tale." If this is so, one can only marvel at the capacity of the folk to retain those symbolic details which are consistent with the whole. The well may act in the ballad as a feminine symbol, as a womb from which Hugh will be spiritually resurrected at the request, appropriately enough, of his mother. Both the "dark door" and the deep well suggest elements of the underworld journey part of the death-rebirth cycle.

"Sir Hugh" is, in a sense, a ballad in two related parts. The first deals with Hugh and his problems up to the time when he



is cast into the well. The second deals with his mother. Her emotional state, when Hugh does not show up with the other boys, is not stated, but is none the less clear from the stanza which tells us what she does:

She's taen her mantle, her about,  
Her coffer by the hand,  
And she's gane out to seek her son,  
And wandered oer the land.

It is psychologically right, of course, that the mother should seek her son, just as it is the ballad father who inevitably pursues his stolen daughter. And the emotional impact of the type figure of the bereaved mother may account for the appeal of this stanza, just as nothing could better convey the maternal, life-affirming nature of the wife of Usher's Well than the description of her putting her mantle over her shoulders and settling down in a kind of desperation to watch over her three sons.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps it is a mother's intuition that leads Hugh's mother to the Jew's castle. The juxtaposition of the above stanza with the statement that "she's doen her to the Jew's garden," suggests that she knew immediately where to seek her son, and speaks of an unusually strong bond between mother and child.

The supernatural atmosphere of the ballad has been so skillfully built up that it is hardly surprising to hear Hugh answer his mother's request:





'Whareer ye be, my sweet Sir Hugh,  
I pray ye to me speak.'

'Gae hame, gae hame, my mither dear,  
Prepare my winding sheet.  
And at the back of Merry Lincoln  
The morn I will you meet.

The supernatural in Hugh's resurrection is transferred to the countryside in an eerie concluding stanza:

And a' the bells o merry Lincoln  
Without men's hands were rung,  
And a' the books o merry Lincoln  
Were read without man's tongue,  
And neer was such a burial  
Sin Adam's days begun.

The significant thing about the above interpretations of "Sir Patrick Spens" and "Sir Hugh" is that they represent an attempt to explain an emotional reaction to poems, probably written without conscious subtlety, which achieve most of their effects by suggestion. That is to say, the emotion which inspired both ballads must not only have been deeply enough felt to evoke a similar response centuries later, but the folk must also have been aware, though intuitively, of the most effective way of conveying that emotion. "Sir Patrick Spens" and "Sir Hugh" are not the work of a degenerate folk, and they are not alone in their excellence.

Symbolic themes and details are clearly responsible for the poetic appeal of many ballads, but symbolism is not the whole story. The power of many ballads may be traced to a lyrically and unsentimentally expressed sense of the tragic in life, and the "emotional core" of many ballads consists of grief of one kind or another. The



better tragic ballads seem to obtain their force from a deep sense of the contrast between life and death, an emotion which still strikes us today, though perhaps not as starkly as it did the people who composed and listened to ballads in centuries past. Two representative tragic ballads, which also happen to be extremely lyrical, are "The Bonny Earl of Murray" (181) and "Bonny James Campbell" (210). "The Wife of Usher's Well" (79), more obviously a narrative, also makes good use of a tragic theme.

"The Bonny Earl of Murray" is an extremely interesting ballad because it differs so radically from most historical ballads though, like them, it takes its origin from an actual occurrence. While the general run of historical ballads tell their stories by means of straight narrative and sometimes are, as ballads go, pretty undistinguished, "The Bonny Earl of Murray" is a deeply felt lament for a "braw gallant" beginning on a note of high despair which is sustained throughout:

Ye highlands and ye lawlands,  
 O where have you been?  
 They have slain the Earl of Murray,  
 And they laid him on the green.

'Now wae be to he Huntly!  
 And wherefore did ye sae?'  
 I bade you bring him wi you,  
 But forbade you him to slay.'

He was a braw gallant,  
 And he rid at the ring;  
 And the Bonny Earl of Murray,  
 Oh he might have been a king.





He was a braw gallant,  
 And he played at the ba;  
 And the bonny Earl of Murray  
 Was the flower amang them a'.

He was a braw gallant,  
 And he played at the glove;  
 And the bonny Earl of Murray,  
 Oh he was the queen's love.

O lang will his lady  
 Look oer the castle down,  
 Ere she see the Earl of Murray  
 Come sounding through the town.

Here is a stirring ballad which contains but one stanza (the first) indicative of the situation behind it. (Perhaps the mention of Murray's relationship with the queen in stanza five suggests why Huntly was despatched to capture him.) Whatever reason Huntly had for what he did, the effect of the second stanza is to communicate that Murray's death was unnecessary, and a terrible waste. The next three stanzas heighten the expression of regret felt by the ballad maker, as they indicate what sort of man was so needlessly killed. There is pure pathos behind the suggestion that he "might have been a king," a detail which raises the ballad to the level of high tragedy. But the last stanza, which contains an echo of "Sir Patrick Spens," is the most evocative of all. In the picture of Murray "sounding" through the town we have the essence of his liveliness and activity so effectively contrasted with the death which was the immediate occasion of the ballad. All three elements of past, present and future are present, in a sense, in Murray alive (the "braw gallant"), dead, and as he might have been



("a king").

The contrast between life and death lies behind a good many of the tragic ballads which have backgrounds of deep feeling. It occurs in "The Wife of Usher's Well," which concludes with the rather odd mention of "the bonny lass/That kindles my mother's fire." Whether or not the line has its roots in the possibility that one of the sons had some relationship with the lass, it ends the ballad with an image of warmth and liveliness which strikingly contrasts with the cold and damp of the grave to which the three sons are headed. And it agrees with the theme of the ballad, which has been the Wife's attempt and failure to bring her sons back to life and keep them with her. No doubt her sons, obeying the call of the cock which signals their return to the grave, would the more keenly feel the hardship in leaving the comfort of their mother's house for their having partaken of it for a while. (A subtle irony, moreover, is that the cock which signals the rebirth of the morning also sends the brothers back to their graves and death.)

The shock involved in death is also the controlling theme in "Bonnie James Campbell." The only thing of real importance to the ballad maker is that James Campbell did not come home; it is of little matter what actually happened to him. The contrast is between the very much alive "bonie" James Campbell riding "in the highlands/And along the sweet Tay," and the grief of his sisters and his wife. The last stanza is perhaps an indication of





what it meant, in physical terms, to lose a husband in the Middle Ages:

'My house is unbigged,  
my barn's unbeen,  
My corn's unshorn,  
my meadow grows green.'

The ballad maker expresses a mood--in this case a tragic one-- in the same way as he indicates character: in terms of external details.

Considering that over eighty of the Child ballads<sup>20</sup> are explicitly tragic in theme, and unrelieved by any positive resolution of the conflict (many more are mainly tragic, but have a happy ending) it is clear that the tragic way of looking at life more or less characterizes the ballad mentality. And it is a consequent primal apprehension of the close relationship between the opposites of life and death that the ballad generally expresses.

The recognition of symbolic and tragic themes in the ballads, of course, is an important part of discussing them as poetry, but symbolism and tragedy are not confined to balladry. They are found in related forms in all kinds of literature. What does make the ballad a poetically unique genre is the balladist's poetic techniques. The ballad has a way of telling its story or of revealing character, to name two of the most important techniques, which is all its own.

Ballad characterization is usually noted for "avoidance of circumstantial detail, the broadest generalization of. . .



character [which] is a leading characteristic of ballad poetry and essential to its traditional preservation. A ballad king is the king, a ballad Saracen is a dog of a moor. . . ballad situations repeat themselves and are transferable, ballad motives are the primary loves and hates, ballad language is formula, and ballad style is precedent."<sup>21</sup> The either/or nature of ballad stories and characters is probably related to a fatalistic and stoic attitude to life. Ballad characters accept what happens to them in the same way that the ballad singers and their audiences accepted unexplained supernatural happenings.

But limited though the techniques of the ballad would seem to be in conveying such things as motivation and character, they do not entirely discourage a kind of literary psychologizing. For example, when the balladist establishes character or mood, he does so by an entirely external method of description. The character of the Scottish king in "Durham Field" (159), for instance, is established by what he does, not what a narrator has to say about him. The revelation of character in this ballad is, in fact, very subtle, and reminiscent of King Lear. The king's squire warns him of the folly of invading England, as he is planning to do, and the reaction seems more violent than the situation warrants:

A long sword out hee drew,  
And there befor his royall companye  
His owne squier hee slew.





The suggestion here, and elsewhere in the ballad, is that the king is determined to believe what he wants to believe, even in the face of a contradictory truth. The advance army of the Scots, as the squire had warned, is met and slaughtered, except for James Douglas, who tells the tale and again warns his king that "one English man is worth fiue Scotts." But the stubborn monarch refuses to face the facts:

'O peace thy talking,' said the King,  
     'They bee but English knaves,  
 But shepards and millers both,  
     And preists with their staves.'

He finds out differently. The point is that the ballad subtly establishes a narrow-minded character whose ambition and delusions of grandeur blind him to the obvious foolishness of his undertaking.

"Glasgerion" (67) shows another example of this method of characterization by action. Glasgerion's "boy," Jack, trickily cuckold his master in spirit by anticipating him in a rendezvous with the queen's daughter. Like the "churl's sonne" he was, says the ballad,

He did not take the lady gay  
     To boulder nor to bedd,  
 But downe vpon her chamber-flore  
     Full soon he hath her layd.

The stanza supplies a vivid impression of the action, which leaves no doubt about the crude and lustful character of Glasgerion's servant.

The external method of characterization may also be cleverly



used to indicate what is passing through the mind of a ballad character at a certain time. Consider Johnnie Armstrong's "grevious look" "over his left shoulder" when he is betrayed, by which the reader knows the depth of the disappointment involved in the abrupt dashing of hope inspired by the king's summons and its suggestion of pardon. In a more humorous vein, witness a passage from "The Knight and Shepherd's daughter" (110). The knight (Sweet William) rapes a young girl who follows him to the court and, by dint of some extraordinary cross country running, arrives shortly after he does. Once there she pleads successfully for the hand of her ravisher. The king

...called down his merry men all,  
By one, by two, and by three;  
Sweet William was us'd to be the first,  
But now the last comes hee.

This stanza tells a great deal. It indicates the knight's knowledge of the meaning of the king's summons, and clearly shows his rather childish reluctance to obey.

It is not necessary to show that all ballads are as subtle as certain details of selected ballads described above to demonstrate the potentiality of the form for achieving such subtlety. That it is not achieved more often is probably due to the unconsciousness of the folk of any pressing need to be artful, though it is surprising how effective the technique can be at times.

Even more striking and significant than the ballad's method of characterization is the very special kind of narrative technique





by which it tells the story; not in gradual and progressive steps, but, according to Gummere's designation, by "leaping and lingering." The tendency of the ballads to tell their story by means of bits of narrative separated by gaps which must be filled in by the imagination, has been compared by Hodgart to the movie technique of montage:<sup>22</sup>

[The ballads] present the narrative not as a continuous sequence of events, but as a series of rapid flashes, and their art lies in the selection and juxtaposition of these flashes. Montage appears not only in the general layout, but in the conventional links describing movement:

He's throw the dark and throw the mark  
And throw the leaves of green.

and even in the commonplace:

He hadna gone a mile, a mile,  
A mile but barely three.

--which is perhaps a very tight compression of three shots. (He is three miles away before the next part of the story begins.)<sup>23</sup>

The first seven stanzas of "Mary Hamilton" (173) both demonstrate the technique of leaping and lingering, and illustrate the resulting economy<sup>24</sup> of the best ballads. The story is developed as quickly as possible (though in a manner which gives all the information needed) so that the narrator may the sooner reach the part of the story which really interests him--the "emotional core" represented by the pathetic picture of a beautiful girl condemned to die. It may be well to quote the seven stanzas with comment to show how the movement from one picture to another suggests the "interscene action" in a manner that would be creditable to a great dramatist:



Word's gane to the kitchen,  
 And word's gane to the ha,  
 That Marie Hamilton gangs wi bairn  
 To the highest Stewart of all.

The indirect manner of this admirable introduction, which quickly establishes the situation, is continued, and the interest heightened in the next stanza, a kind of flashback:

He's courted her in the kitchen,  
 He's courted her in the ha,  
 He's courted her in the laigh cellar,  
 And that was the warst of all.

Thus is something of the development of the courtship suggested, which began with encounters in the kitchen and hall, and culminated in the fatal assignation(or assignations) in the cellar. By stanza three Mary has had the baby, concrete evidence of a relationship she must hide:

She's tyed it in her apron  
 And she's thrown it in the sea;  
 Says Sink ye, swim ye, bonny wee babe!  
 You'll neer get mair o me.

The last two lines of this stanza is a commonplace which probably belongs to another ballad. In view of Mary's later tender-heartedness, it would seem that the desperation no doubt implicit in her child-murder could be better conveyed. At any rate, the measure was taken too late, and in vain:

Down then cam the auld queen,  
 Goud tassels tying her hair:  
 'O Marie where's the bonny wee babe  
 That I heard greetsae sair?'





'There was never a babe intill my room  
 As little designs to be;  
 It was but a touch of my sair side,  
 Come oer my fair bodie.'

Though not indicated in so many words, it is clear from the next stanza, that Mary's lie has not fooled the queen:

'O Marie, put on your robes o black,  
 Or else your robes o brown,  
 For ye maun gang wi me the night,  
 To see fair Edinbro town.'

The game is clearly up for Mary and she knows it. And the next stanza shows the change which comes over her when she accepts her fate and resolves to be defiant:

'I winna put on my robes o black,  
 Nor yet my robes o brown;  
 But I'll put on my robes o white,  
 To shine through Edinbro town.'

The wearing of white perhaps suggests a sense of Mary's own purity of heart despite her crime, or at least a sense of unfair persecution.

Now the ballad, which has been so economical to this point, devotes three stanzas to Mary's condemnation at the Canongate, and the emotional circumstances surrounding it. The first of these is essentially a commonplace which, however, is very effectively used:

When she gaed up the Cannogate,  
 She laughed loud laughters three;  
 But whan she cam down the Cannogate  
 The teir blinded her ee.

It is difficult to conceive of a better way of contrasting the outward impression Mary wants to convey with her white robes and her



defiance, and the natural reaction of a young girl to the knowledge that she is condemned to die. This is a feeling everyone can share with her and the ladies weeping for her in the windows. And, knowing how she feels, we admire her unsentimental address to the sympathetic ladies:

'Ye need nae weep for me,' she says,  
     'Ye need nae weep for me;  
 For had I not slain mine own sweet babe,  
     This death I wadna dee.

This stanza begins Mary's "last words," comprising eight stanzas--the emotional centre of the poem. The last six of these stanzas exhibit a rather intricate parallelism of structure which (along with their emotional effect) adds interest to the poem. In each of stanzas thirteen and fourteen, Mary drinks to "the jolly sailors" and desires them not to reveal her fate to her parents. Stanzas fifteen and sixteen take the "mother and father" out of the previous stanza and assigns to them a stanza each. Stanza fifteen contrasts Mary's childhood and innocence:

'Oh little did my mother think,  
     The day she cradled me,

with her later, less innocent, life and her present situation:

What lands I was to travel through,  
     What death I was to dee.

Stanza sixteen follows the same pattern of "then-and-now" contrast with minor variations, and stanza seventeen moves to the more immediate contrast between yesterday and today:





'Last nicht I washd the queen's feet,  
 And gently laid her down;  
 And a' the thanks I've gotten the nicht  
 To be hangd in Edinbro town!

The last, lyrical and memorable stanza concentrates the "then-and-now" into two lines:

Last nicht there was four Maries,  
 The nicht there'll be but three;  
 There was Marie Seton and Marie Beton,  
 And Marie Carmichael and me.

The fact that this sort of structure does not operate throughout the poem is probably accounted for by the same reason one is surprised to find any "architecture" at all in popular poetry: the ballad makers are not consciously artistic.

The sort of "montage" that is found in "Mary Hamilton" is also identifiable in ballads like "Johnnie Armstrong" (169), which ends with a leap from the vivid picture of the last battle of the hero to that of his son vowing vengeance on his father's murderers. Also, in "The Braes o Yarrow" (214) we have a "shot" of two lovers conversing:

'O I am not going to hawke,' he says,  
 'As I ha done before, O,  
 But for to meet your brother Jhon,  
 Upon the braes of Yarrow.

Without any suggestion of greeting, or any details of the actual encounter of the men, we now hear them talking:

'I have your sister to mywife,  
 'Ye' think me an unmeet marrow;  
 But yet one foot will I never flee  
 Now frae the braes of Yarrow.'



The ballad continues in this way. One cannot but be struck, in most cases, by the appropriateness of what is selected to be told, and what is leapt over. The economy is generally such that nothing is left out that cannot be filled in by the imagination, and, as a matter of fact, the stimulation of the imagination is probably one of the most important functions of this narrative technique. Its method is that of telling a story largely by implication, and it has been approximated (not achieved) by the authors of only a few of the best literary ballads.

Whatever the reason for calling the ballads good poetry, whether it is their symbolism, their narrative qualities, or their tragic orientation, it seems to be a fact that the ballad as poetry is usually an unrealized genre. That is to say, though the potentiality of the ballad often shows in flashes of creative genius, the form as a whole is poetically uneven. There is a paradox involved here. The conscious analyst who sees a fault is never the unconscious creative artist. The ballad is the *métier* of the folk, and only the folk is qualified to make changes in the ballad, though improvement must necessarily be a slow and somewhat chancy business when entrusted to an artist who does not know what art is. Perhaps we should look at the ballads as Browning's Andrea del Sarto looks at a painting of Raphael's. Here and there a fault of composition can be noticed, but there is no deficiency of "soul."

The ballad is, in a way, an organic art form. While it re-





mains in tradition, it grows and changes, and there is both good and bad in the change though, as Chapter Four pointed out, the good tends to predominate. However, there are other changes which take place in the ballads, changes which seem to happen when the ballad is isolated from the ideal conditions for its transmission and evolution--the oral tradition. It would be unrealistic to say that had all the ballads been preserved in an "uncorrupted" oral tradition, they would have evolved into something like "Sir Patrick Spens," or "Lord Randal." The creative power of the folk seems to be an uneven one, and it would be wrong to use the folk as a lot of poetic noble savages. Still, the ballad does seem to fare better in tradition than out of it, as the evidence shows. People who have been exposed to "culture," and to print are not fundamentally in sympathy either with the themes of popular poetry or its techniques, and when they get their hands on the ballad it generally ceases to have the sort of qualities for which the ballad is universally admired. Two of these qualities which are altered for the worse in the ballad are its symbolism and its unique narrative technique.

Though John Greenway fails to realize it, the ballads function symbolically often because of what is primitive about them. They contain archaic motifs which appeal to the unconscious, and often to basic emotions which civilization has taught us to suppress. When later culture loses sympathy with the unconscious, the suppression which results affects symbolism in poetry and elsewhere, and



in this sense it is perhaps possible to see a degeneration in the creative and receptive faculties of those who preserve the ballads. The later culture denies the claims of the unconscious, and in the process it denies that, including symbolism, which works on the unconscious. Later ballads<sup>25</sup> tend to be bald of symbolic appeal. They are merely stories and sometimes, unfortunately, stories told in inartistic fashion. It is difficult to say which is the greater loss to the ballad as a genre: the disappearance of folklore or of the characteristic ballad narrative. Both changes can be well documented.

A clear example of the rationalization of ancient motifs, cited by MacEdward Leach, is an American version of "Sir Lionel" (18), which, in its early form, "is a wierd mythological tale concerned with the slaying of a great boar, a tale that goes back perhaps to the cult of the Great Mother; its American counterpart, 'Old Bangum,' is a rollicking song of a wild and woolly mountain hunter who kills a wild pig."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps some of the rationalization is inevitable, because unconscious, as Phillips Barry suggests in some remarks about what happens to the plot of "The Twa Sisters":

The original form of the plot, featuring not two sisters but three, is in Polish and sporadically also in Scottish and Scotch-Irish tradition. The form of the plot as we have it. . . differs from the normal tradition in that the cause of murderous jealousy is not grounded in love for a suitor, but in a pathological attachment between father and daughter. . . . The reason for this development [the rationalization] is that a certain number of persons who have sung the ballad have been sufferers from frustrations, soured on





the world, and as a result of their pathological make-up, have come to forget those stanzas which relate to the part of the lover; The very stanzas which should be the least likely to be forgotten.<sup>27</sup>

It seems to be the predicament of the ballad that the very imaginative impression it makes is occasionally the cause of its emasculation by rationalization. This sort of repression damages the ballads as poetry.

Significant damage is also done to the narrative in later ballads when the technique of leaping and lingering is eschewed in favor of a more ordinary sort of narration. Later "balladists" see themselves as poetic dentists, filling the cavities in a decayed ballad narrative. In reality it is those very "holes" in the ballad which gives it character. When ballads read like any conventional narrative, they explain much more than is necessary, generally at the expense of poetic effect. The otherwise admirable ballad of "Fair Annie" (62), for instance, contains one stanza of explanation which is superfluous since what it explains is obvious. Annie's sister prematurely reveals in the middle of the ballad what is then anticlimactically told again in the end:

'There came a knight out oer the sea,  
And steald my sister away;  
The shame scoup in his company,  
And land whereer he gae!'

There is a similar stanza in "Bonnie Barbara Allen" (84) which needlessly explains the treatment she gives her dying lover:

'O dinna ye mind, young man,' said she,  
'When ye was in the tavern a drinking,  
That ye made the healths gae round and round,  
And slighted Barbara Allen?'



In "Durham Field" (159), the Scottish king is seen prematurely assigning English land, which he expects to capture while the main part of the English force is fighting elsewhere, to his nobles. Fourteen stanzas are devoted to accomplishing little else, while the stanza which sums up the process could easily replace all the others, with the advantage of adding a masterly ironical understatement to a poem which is already based on the Scottish king's misconception of his foe:

Fiue score knights he made on a day,  
And dubbed them with his hands;  
Rewarded them right worthilye  
With the townes in merry England.

Now the sort of poetic inconsistency found in the three ballads just mentioned may perhaps be explained by an inconsistency in the poetic ability of the folk. Perhaps the folk's standards are ultimately lower than those of the sophisticated artist. But any stanza in a ballad which explains why a situation is thus, or why a character acted so, is suspect because the folk usually are concerned with presenting a situation as they see it, without analysing it, and without trying to account for it.

To the early collectors like Scott and Percy, of course, the vision of the folk was incomplete and had to be supplemented to make their ballads into "coherent" stories. People who do not share the peculiar attitude of the folk are the ones who add explanatory "connecting" stanzas. A good many ballads, as a result, leave nothing to the imagination, taking care to inform the reader of every detail





that he might otherwise miss. Mrs. Muir documents this procedure in a later version of "Young Beichan" (53). The underlined lines were added to satisfy someone's yen for detail and explanation:

But long ere seven years had an end  
 She longd full sore her love to see,  
For ever a voice within her breast  
Said 'Beichan has broke his vow to thee.'  
 So she's set her foot on good ship-board  
 And turnd her back on her own countrie.

"The Twa Corbies" and "The Three Ravens" are printed by Child as different versions of the same ballad although Scott calls the former "rather a counterpart than a copy of" the latter. The fact is that the loyalty of hawks, hounds and leman in "The Three Ravens" makes the tone of the ballad completely different from that of "The Twa Corbies," and weakens the poem by making the birds of prey superfluous. "The Twa Corbies" was probably more like the original ballad (and typical of the folk's attitude) in its characteristically relentless concentration on the theme of betrayal.

Most of the Robin Hood ballads, many of the historical ballads and other ballads here and there in Child's collection, are sound, sometimes absorbing, stories. But they are not great poems, and few people know them outside of the folk (who still preserve them as songs), and the scholars (who read them out of a sense of duty). There are many more great ballads than the college freshman studies, but if all 305 of the Child ballads are taken into consideration, the quality of the ballad as a genre is, so to speak, diluted. No doubt many ballads are preserved in tradition and else-



where by attractive tunes. But in the consideration of the merits of ballad texts alone, the necessity arises of admitting that not all the ballads possess the peculiar excellences that can be found in the best ones.





## CONCLUSION

The artistic procedure by which the ballads were originally created is vague, and the obscurity of ultimate origins perhaps places more emphasis on the shaping influence of communal re-creation than it deserves. The oral tradition may or may not have been the most important means of making the ballad the objective and impersonal genre it is. We do know that tradition tends to erase marks of individuality from the ballads, but without knowing the whole history of balladry we cannot be sure that the earliest ballads were not essentially the same as they are now. At any rate, the impersonality, the grass-roots themes and the unique narrative manner of the ballads marks them as a collective genre whether that quality derives from first or subsequent origins. The force behind the ballads comes from what is archetypal in them, from the preoccupation of the ballad-makers with the lowest common denominators of human interest.

Gerould has said that the ballad "has the qualities of great literature: a substance and a form that satisfy the heart and mind."<sup>1</sup> It would probably be more accurate to say that the ballad has the makings of great literature. The possibilities of the form for subtlety are undeniable, and many ballads contain flashes of poetic brilliance and genuine insight of which one would hardly believe the folk capable. To be sure great ballads are the exception rather than



the rule, but the amazing fact remains that folk poetry has developed on its own, undirected by any self-conscious "experts" in the field, into a form which at its best can be highly sophisticated. The ballad is not always at the top of its potential form, though the so-called "limitations" of the folk have not restricted them as much as one might expect. Remembering that not every change made in a ballad by tradition is necessarily an improvement, as revisions by conscious authors usually are, and that the ballad-makers must explore many fruitless paths before they find the right one, the degree of perfection reached by some ballads is little short of miraculous.





## FOOTNOTES

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup>James, "The English and Scottish Popular Ballads of Francis J. Child," 16.

<sup>2</sup>The ballad will often be called "collective" in this thesis rather than "communal" or "popular," though all three terms are more or less interchangeable. The word "communal" is avoided because of its primitivistic connotations, and the use of "popular" is limited because, unlike "collective," it does not seem to clearly suggest "of the group," as opposed to "of the individual."

### Chapter I

<sup>1</sup>Sidney, Apologie For Poetrie, 31-32.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>3</sup>Hodgart, The Ballads, 144.

<sup>4</sup>Broadus, "Addison's Influence on the Development of Interest in Folk-Poetry of the Eighteenth Century," 4.

<sup>5</sup>Addison, The Spectator, no. 70 (May 21, 1711).

<sup>6</sup>Hustvedt, Ballad Criticism in Scandinavia and Great Britain During the Eighteenth Century, 85.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 137.

<sup>9</sup>All references to ballads by number should be understood to refer to Francis J. Child's definitive collection, The English and Scottish Popular Ballads.



<sup>10</sup>Gummere, The Popular Ballad, 73.

<sup>11</sup>Hustvedt, Ballad Criticism, 158-9.

<sup>12</sup>Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 251-52.

<sup>13</sup>Ritson, ed., Ancient Songs and Ballads, xvii-xviii.

Shenstone, in a letter to Percy, also made the distinction (1761): "It is become habitual to me to call that a Ballad, which describes or implies some action; on the other hand, I term that a Song, which contains only an expression of sentiment." (Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 251.) Percy seems to have ignored Shenstone's point.

<sup>14</sup>Hustvedt, Ballad Criticism, 239.

<sup>15</sup>It is interesting to note that even modern editors occasionally use a similar method. Arthur Quiller Couch, in his Oxford Book of Ballads (1927), endorses Scott's editorial principles, though he promises to be more "chary" than his predecessor. He takes the liberty "of removing here and there in these eight hundred and sixty-five pages a coarse or a brutal phrase," (xi) and of "presenting each ballad as one, and reconstructing it sometimes from many versions. . . ." (xii).

<sup>16</sup>Bascom, "Folklore and Anthropology," 31.

## Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>Gerould, referring to "A Ballad of the Twelfth Day" (in The Ballad of Tradition, 34), calls it "clear evidence that the traditional ballad was so firmly established by the thirteenth century that it could be imitated by a pious versifier, quite as it was imitated in the nineteenth century by eminent poets."

<sup>2</sup>The test of a ballad is not that it has been found in oral tradition, nor that it originated in a particular way, nor that it conforms to a standard metrical formula. The longest Spanish ballad, "Count Dirlos," contains some 700 double octosyllables. Russian "byliny" may reach 900 lines, as in Kalinin's version of "Mihailo Potyk." Three out of four types of European ballads are not stanzaic at all, like the English ballad. Entwhistle, European Balladry, 25.

<sup>3</sup>Hodgart, The Ballads, 66.





<sup>4</sup>Entwhistle, European Balladry, 231.

<sup>5</sup>Keith, "Scottish Ballads: Their Evidence of Authorship and Origin," 42.

<sup>6</sup>It may be no coincidence that Leslie Shepard (in The Broadside Ballad, 52) calls the period from 1557 to 1709 "the first great chapter in broadside history." He bases his early date on the incorporation of the Stationer's Company in 1556 which, in the following year, began to require legal registration of ballads. It is difficult to envision the golden age of the traditional ballad, and the first great chapter in broadside ballad history occurring simultaneously, unless there is some connection between them.

Later historical ballads are thus recorded by Entwhistle (in European Balladry, 231-232): "The entire group of Scottish border ballads from 'Johnnie Armstrong' (169) to 'Parcy Reed' (193), belongs to the sixteenth century, together with 'Mary Hamilton' (173), 'Edom o Gordon' (178), 'The Bonny Earl of Murray' (181), 'The Laird o Logie' (182), 'Willie Mackintosh' (183) and perhaps 'Outlaw Murray' (305). They are followed by thirteen ballads on Scottish battles and tragedies of the seventeenth century (194-206), and three from the eighteenth. There are other Scottish ballads, of a more domestic nature, which can be referred to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The English evidence allows for a higher antiquity, but is more difficult to follow because of possible literary interference. Child has a sturdy group of sixteenth-century ballads extending from 'Andrew Barton' to 'King James and Brown' (167-180, from A.D. 1511-78), and he reproduces four sea-songs from that era and the next. This is the principal group of historical ballads, and it would have been vastly increased had his [Child's] editorial policy allowed him to include the Tudor political pieces by named authors. The sixteenth century was the apogee of the historical ballads in England as in Scotland."

<sup>7</sup>Keith, "Scottish Ballads," 742.

<sup>8</sup>Nygard (in "Ballad Source Study: Child Ballad No. 4 as Exemplar," 189-90) suggests another difficulty in the use of the dates derived internally from the historical ballads: "Is it not conceivable that the historic event has merely reinvested a song of earlier date with new vigor through an adventitious historical applicability. A notorious event is able to give new life, another habitation and name, to the narrative which had passed current in tradition. . . . Certainly some ballads are so lacking in circumstantial detail, so fraught with commonplace event and phrasing, that one must recognize the possibility that the single ballad often no better describes one historical event than another. The Scottish bride-stealing ballads may be taken as a case in point."



<sup>9</sup>Chambers, English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages, 154.

<sup>10</sup>Hodgart, The Ballad, 66.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>13</sup>Kittredge and Sargent, eds., English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 255.

<sup>14</sup>Chambers, English Literature, 130.

<sup>15</sup>Hodgart, The Ballad, 68.

<sup>16</sup>Greene, ed., A Selection of English Carols, 5.

<sup>17</sup>Hodgart, The Ballad, 73.

<sup>18</sup>Ker, "On the History of the Ballads, 1100-1500," 4.

<sup>19</sup>Pound, Poetic Origins and the Ballad, 7. J. W. Rankin (in "Rhythm and Rhyme Before the Norman Conquest"), tries to prove the existence of rhythm and rhyme before the Norman Conquest. Though "what has been preserved of Anglo-Saxon poetry [he says] never becomes regular and completely rhythmical, rimed, or strophic in form," he suggests that the body of Anglo-Saxon literature which has come down to us does not reflect the whole spectrum of literature: It omits, for instance, precisely those songs of the common people that might be expected to be the forerunners of ballads. Rankin points out that singing did take place in Anglo-Saxon times (William of Malmesbury's account of Aldhem singing quasi artem cantitandi professus in the eighth century, and "certain hints and scraps" "in the monkish manuscripts which are the more convincing as evidence because they are the unconscious admissions of hostile witnesses") and concludes that the songs must have been "characterized by appreciably regular stress, rhythm and homopathy, so that end rime was by no means, to use Professor Alden's phrase, 'a stranger'." It may be convincing to some, as it is to Rankin, that these songs were not preserved because their singers did not know how to write, but "hints and scraps" still provide no more than a suggestion of regularly stressed Anglo-Saxon song, and such evidence can hardly be built upon.







<sup>20</sup>Outside England, ballad dates cannot be pushed much further back than "Judas." Denmark has the oldest ballads. The ballad of the "Battle of Lena," for instance, is from the year 1208, being a straightforward report on the event without modernization. Other ballads go further back, but are not free from retouching. "Erik Emun's Murder" (1137), "Sir Stig Hvide's Death" (1151) and "Svend Grade" or "The Battle of Graahede" (1157) are some of the earliest ballads surviving. Entwhistle (European Balladry, 63).

Miss Pound (Poetic Origins, 189) has this to say about the early history of the ballads: "Ballads cannot have been very abundant when the makers of the Sloane MS. 2593 and the Balliol MS. 354 made their collections. These men obviously had a taste for popular verse, yet compared to their display of related types of folk verse, of approaches to ballads, their showing of ballads proper is meagre. Had many ballads of the Child type been in general circulation in Southern England before the Elizabethan period, had this type of verse been so recognised, so distinctive and current as it was in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the makers of later manuscript books might have been expected to give proportionate space to ballads in their pages."

<sup>21</sup>Coulton, Medieval Panorama, 80.

<sup>22</sup>Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 245.

<sup>23</sup>Housman, ed., British Popular Ballads, 44. Housman also sees in the border districts and in the lowlands "the social and human tensions that provide incidents for the ballad maker's imagination." These consist of precarious conditions in which cattle raids, robberies of moss-trooper and reiver, and political rivalries are felt deeply and immediately.

<sup>24</sup>Entwhistle, European Balladry, 29.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>26</sup>Pound, Poetic Origins, 197.

<sup>27</sup>Housman, British Popular Ballads, 45-46.

<sup>28</sup>Greene, ed., English Carols, 26.

<sup>29</sup>For instance, Hodgart, The Ballad, 82.

<sup>30</sup>Pound, Poetic Origins, 48.



<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 64-67.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 53. Professor C. A. Smith cites an account of a highly diverting dramatic version of "The Maid Freed From the Gallows" found among southern Negroes. S. Baring-Gould says of a Cornish version of "The Elfin Knight": "This used in former times to be presented in dramatic shape by a young man who went outside the room and a girl who sat on the settle or a chair and a sort of chorus of farm lads and lasses." 'Andrew Lammie' "used in former times to be presented in dramatic shape at rustic weddings in Aberdeenshire." "The Swedish version of 'Willie's Lyke-Wake' is said to be often represented as a drama by young people in country places." Of the story of "Our Goodman" we are told that it is sung in several parts of France as a little drama. "Dugald Quin," as Professor Gummere has pointed out, is very near to choral song. Another ballad drama is the little Orkney "Play of the Lathie Odivere" of which the ballad original has not survived. (McKnight, "Ballad and Dance," 36.)

<sup>36</sup>Gummere, The Popular Ballad, 74n.

<sup>37</sup>Bronson, "The Interdependence of Ballad Tunes and Their Texts," 83.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>40</sup>Pound, Poetic Origins, 69.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 71. The numbers applied to these fragments are from the collection of Danish ballads made by Gruntvig, which is analogous to Child's English collection.

<sup>42</sup>McKnight, "Ballad and Dance," 33-34.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>44</sup>Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 223.





<sup>45</sup>Gummere, "The Ballad and Communal Poetry," 25.

<sup>46</sup>Entwhistle (in European Balladry, 12) prefers to call the folk "analphabetic," not wishing to attribute the ballads to an illiterate group.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>48</sup>Gummere, The Popular Ballad, 24.

<sup>49</sup>Kittredge and Sargent, eds., The English and Scottish Ballads, xix.

<sup>50</sup>Graves, ed., The English Ballad, 13.

<sup>51</sup>Gummere, "The Ballad and Communal Poetry," 20. It should be noted that Gummere later felt it necessary to consolidate his position. In The Popular Ballad (56) he says: "There is no miracle, no mystery even, to be assumed for the making of the ballad, which was composed originally as any other poem is composed, by the rhythmic and imaginative efforts of the human mind."

<sup>52</sup>Smith, South Carolina Ballads, 35.

<sup>53</sup>Gummere, ed., Old English Ballads, xcii.

<sup>54</sup>Barry, "The Part of the Folk Singer in the Making of Folk Balladry," 60.

<sup>55</sup>Bronson, "The Interdependence of Ballad Tunes and Texts," 79.

<sup>56</sup>Smith, ed., South Carolina Ballads, 35.

### Chapter III

<sup>1</sup>Entwhistle, European Balladry, 89.

<sup>2</sup>Gummere, The Popular Ballad, 54-55.

<sup>3</sup>Henderson, The Ballad in Literature, 98.

<sup>4</sup>Allingham, ed., The Ballad Book, xiii.

<sup>5</sup>Greene, ed., English Carols, 19.



<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 20. Of course Ritson made the same distinction much earlier. (See above, p.10)

<sup>7</sup>Shepard, The Broadside Ballad, 52.

<sup>8</sup>Graves (in The English Ballad, 20) has this interesting objection to the idea of minstrel authorship: "The complicated training which ancient court bards had to undergo did in most cases no doubt stifle the poetic impulse. It is recorded that in ancient Ireland the bardic students had among other rigorous tasks to lie all night in a coffin-like box with heavy weights resting on their body, or for hours in a bath of cold water, and with these aids to concentration were set to compose formal odes in metres of a complication seldom since rivalled."

<sup>9</sup>Entwhistle, European Balladry, 73.

<sup>10</sup>Pound, Poetic Origins, 110. ("The Holy Well" and "The Bitter Withy" are not included in Child's collection.) Gerould (The Ballad of Tradition, 37), is surprised to find that there are no hagiographical stories among the ballads, and that only one ballad, "Sir Hugh" (155), is traceable to the medieval exemplum.

<sup>11</sup>Sharp, English Folk Song, 56.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>13</sup>Beckwith, "The English Ballad in Jamaica," 455.

<sup>14</sup>Torrend, for example (in Specimens of Bantu Folk-lore From Northern Rhodesia, 3) tells that "the typical old Bantu tale consists of two distinct parts, one narrative, mostly in the form of dialogue, the other sung."

<sup>15</sup>Beckwith, "The English Ballad in Jamaica," 467.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 468.

<sup>17</sup>It is often interesting to note the contradictory nature of ballad scholarship. The following passage (from McKnight, "Ballad and Dance," 31-32) seizes upon almost exactly the same ballad characteristics as Miss Beckwith, but derives them all from a different source, the dance: "In the first place, to dissociate the popular ballad in its origin from the old dancing custom, is to do away with the most plausible explanation for those qualities that distinguish the ballads of the Child canon from other forms of popular song. The objectivity, so marked a quality of the Child





ballad, finds a satisfactory explanation in the conditions of choral origin. The elemental quality of the emotions dealt with, likewise, is of the kind suited for expression in choral dance. The ballad commonplace, also, the well worn phraseology, the oft-used ornamental details of opening verses and of conclusions, indicate choral improvisation rather than more deliberate invention. The 'incremental repetition' so much stressed by Professor Gummere, although by no means an exclusive property of the popular ballad, never affording as it does, opportunity for lingering over certain situations, suits the character of the dancing ring. Above all, the refrains, persisting in so many versions, even in versions recorded from the singing of soloists, afford indication, which may not be disregarded, that at one time a chorus had its share in the song."

<sup>18</sup>Leach, ed., The Ballad Book, 3.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>20</sup>Entwhistle, European Balladry, 39.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>22</sup>Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 103.

<sup>23</sup>Hodgart, The Ballads, 75.

<sup>24</sup>Entwhistle, European Balladry, 104. "The Grene Knight" (from the Percy folio) is probably a doggerel version of "Sir Gawain and the Grene Knight."

<sup>25</sup>Hodgart, The Ballads, 82.

<sup>26</sup>Greene, ed., English Carols, 24.

<sup>27</sup>Hodgart (in The Ballads, 79) says: "The carol, like the non-narrative lyric, seems to have preceded the ballad everywhere in Western Europe." The carol spread from France to Denmark in the twelfth century, some time before the ballads are believed to have originated there.

<sup>28</sup>Entwhistle (in European Balladry, 62) says: "The English 'Judas' is our oldest recorded ballad, going back to the thirteenth century, and the German 'Armer Judas' has been often cited since the fifteenth century, being a rendering of a Latin hymn of the century previous. In other countries there is no similar priority to be claimed for the religious poems, which always have one unusual feature; viz. the ease with which they may be compared to a literary test, the Bible, known to all."



<sup>29</sup>Brown, ed., English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century, xxxviii.

<sup>30</sup>Greene, ed., English Carols, 33.

<sup>31</sup>Pound, Poetic Origins, 184.

<sup>32</sup>Barry, "The Part of the Folk Singer in the Making of Folk Balladry," 75.

<sup>33</sup>The Ionian mode must be excepted. Its popularity with the common people led the church to call it modus lascivus, and to prohibit it from use in the divine office. (Sharp, English Folk Song, 55.)

<sup>34</sup>Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 220.

<sup>35</sup>Davies, ed., Medieval English Lyrics, 309.

<sup>36</sup>Some critics settle for a partial demonstration of ballad origins by migration and borrowing. It may be possible to discover ballad "trade routes." Shepard, for instance, feels (in The Broad-side Ballad, 41) that "the dominant elements in ballads are undoubtedly vestiges of the great Aryan migrations of ancient times, stemming from the common source of Indo-European tradition." Shepard gives examples from ancient Hindu scriptures of motifs which can be identified in "Riddles Wisely Expounded" (1). Entwhistle, too, (in European Balladry, viii) believes that there has been a marked traffic in certain motifs, and he shows what he means by tracing the history of "Earl Brand" (7): "In their commerce with England and Scotland the Scandinavian ballads have had to cross the sea, though they are welcomed on arrival as pieces in our own manner. . . . The texts declare their intimate relationship, but have been much changed, and the melodies are hard to identify. 'Ribbolt and Guldborg' is a good example. It is essentially a story of taboo. By naming Ribbolt's name, Guldborg leads to his death in battle against her seven brothers. The plot is encountered in the Eddic Helgavida II, and the superiority of the Danish version justifies the belief that the 'vise' [Danish: ballad] arose in Denmark. It has covered all the north: Swedish 'Hildebrand' or 'Redesvold', Norse 'Rikeball and Veneros', Icelandic 'Ribbalds Kvoedi'. In Scotland it is called 'Earl Brand' (doubtless a variation of Hildebrand) and 'The Douglas Tragedy', and it is living in the Appalachians under the titles 'The Seven Sleepers', 'The Seven Brothers', or 'Sweet William' (pp. 76-77). Transmission, Entwhistle believes, is by oral, rather than printed means, and is greatly aided by the tunes and the sameness of the ballad style from country to country. The linguistic obstacle is overcome by shading dialects into each other.







## Chapter IV

<sup>1</sup>Gummere, The Popular Ballad, 287. Gummere's earlier opinion of communal transmission (in Old English Ballads, xcvi) seems to be more negative: "Modern critics would teach us that the ballad, made as any other poem is made, gets its impersonal and differencing quality by oral transmission alone; a glance at the relations which melody, dance, refrain and improvisation bear to the later narrative ballad shows us that its earliest form could never have been that of a poem such as individual authors compose, and it is these four elements, moreover, dwindled and uncertain as they are, which give us our best notion of primitive poetry in its habit as it lived."

<sup>2</sup>There are some who hold that communal re-creation was not as important in balladry as oral-formulaic improvisation. Communal re-creation and transmission depend on memory, while formulaic improvisation is accomplished with the use of a number of formulas--standard words and phrases for saying certain things. It is known that lengthy oral epics (as in Homeric or modern Yugoslavian poetry) can be more or less spontaneously improvised in a formulaic way. Much of Anglo-Saxon poetry was probably similarly composed. And, of course, the ballad has its formulas, or commonplaces.

As a matter of fact, all oral composers probably find it necessary to build on their themes in a formulaic way. This condition is imposed on the original creators of oral literature by the very absence of print which would enable them to record their creative progress. Oral literature is in the mind, not on the page, and the formula helps its original composers to remember what they said from one performance to the next. There is a great difference, however, between remembering a poem in which every part of every line is different, and remembering a poem which uses formulaic statements only as a point of departure. In the early history of the ballad, then, oral formulaic creation was probably a necessity. But the ballads differ from oral epics in being much shorter, stanzaic in form, and sung to a distinctive tune. All these things facilitate memory, and there is good reason to believe that ballads, once created and established in some sort of recognizable individual form, would be preserved by memorization. There is no suggestion that the ballads were being improvised at the time of singing by ballad singers whose songs were collected "live" in this century and the last. At any rate, the ballad commonplaces and stock incidents do not seem to be as complicated and restrictive as the formulaic systems found, say, in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

<sup>3</sup>Pound, Poetic Origins, 24-25.

<sup>4</sup>Gerould, "The Making of the Ballads," 21.



<sup>5</sup>Sharp, English Folk Song, 16.

<sup>6</sup>Henderson, The Ballad in Literature, 68.

<sup>7</sup>Witness the following corruptions. "Lord Randal" is found in the following forms: "Johnny Randolph," "Johnny Ramsay," "Jimmy Randall," "Jimmy Ransing" and "Johnny Ransing." "The Gypsy Laddie" becomes "Gypsy Geordie," "The Gyptain Laddie," "Gypsen Davy," "Gypsy Davy," "Black Jack Davy" and "The Gypsy Daisy." The last is a considerable corruption. Sometimes changes are humorous, as in the version of "Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard" entitled "Little Mosie Grove and Lord Burnett's Wife." Sometimes they are just: "Barbara Allen" becomes "Barbarous Ellen"; "Lord Thomas" becomes "Low Thomas." A work which, though in a slightly different area, corroborates the theory of corruption stemming from oral tradition has been done by W. Edson Richmond. His study ("Some Effects of Scribal and Typographical Error on Oral Tradition"), gives examples of errors which could, without much difficulty, be envisioned as resulting from faulty oral transmission. Scribal error will result from faulty phonetic recording of unfamiliar words (and, in the early times, perhaps, from the lack of standardization of recording techniques): "The anonymous seventeenth century scribe of Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript corrupted 'Terouenne' to 'Turwin,' 'Boulogne' to 'Bullen,' 'Montreuil' to 'Mutrell,' and 'Guienne' to 'Gynye' in his version of 'Fflodden Ffield.'" By capitalization, moreover, Yonburn Brae can be made of "yon burn brae" (as in a West Virginia variant of "Bessie Bell and Mary Gray"). "Thomas o Younderdale clearly stems from the same process. Among printing errors, Richmond finds several variations of the village of Penmanscore in "The Outlaw Murray": Penman's Core, Penman Score, and Permanscore. Since the oral tradition continued to function after the invention of printing, and was certainly contemporaneous with the ability to write of some part of the populace, and since the oral tradition will absorb composed printed matter, it is not difficult to estimate the influence of such errors.

<sup>8</sup>Sharp, English Folk Song, 95.

<sup>9</sup>Henderson, The Ballad, 68.

<sup>10</sup>Moore, "The Influence of Transmission on the English Ballads," 389.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 401.

<sup>12</sup>Keith, "Scottish Ballads: Their Evidence of Authorship and Origin," 41-42.







<sup>13</sup>Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 79.

<sup>14</sup>Mrs. Muir (in Living With Ballads, 86) says: "I have seen it stated that disturbed and brawling times are the ideal background for the production of ballads: This statement, I think, needs qualification. One must have a nucleus of strong feeling round which to form a ballad." This nucleus in "The Fire of Frenndraught" (196), for instance, was probably constituted by the outrage of the tradition of hospitality current in the area concerned.

<sup>15</sup>Coffin, "'Mary Hamilton' and the Anglo-American Ballad as an Art Form," 248-249.

<sup>16</sup>Entwhistle, European Balladry, 27.

<sup>17</sup>Gummere, in his anxiety to discredit the shaping force of oral tradition, takes the opposite view (in The Popular Ballad, 80-81): "We know that in the personal reminiscence, and still more in the tale at second hand, dramatic conditions will be sensibly reduced, and epic details will spring up like a young forest about the parent tree. What led to the event, what complicated it and heightened it, what came after it, what sort of man the hero was, and what interplay of character and circumstance: these are details not to speak of reflective elements that wait so closely upon reminiscence, which now will seem necessary to the teller and interesting to the audience."

<sup>18</sup>Entwhistle, European Balladry, 27.

<sup>19</sup>Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 184.

<sup>20</sup>Gerould, "The Making of the Ballad," 19.

<sup>21</sup>Sharp, English Folk Song, 13. Sharp is not the only one to feel this way. Hodgart (in The Ballads, 161) says: "Communal re-creation is a very real thing and can transform a commonplace song into one of great beauty, by a succession of small changes made by one folksinger after another. It is, in fact, doubtful if such a miraculous event [as absolute creation] can ever take place, since every poet works in a tradition, and 'creates' by modifying what has been handed down to him by the poets of the past. All art is collaboration between the living and the dead, and folk art mainly differs from the art of the elite in that this collaboration is more obvious."



<sup>22</sup>Gerould (in The Ballad of Tradition, 74) says that ballads are stories, "which explains why their melodies are usually subordinated to the words, and why close variants of the same ballad are found to have completely different tunes."

<sup>23</sup>Sharp, English Folk Song, 21.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>25</sup>Hodgart, The Ballads, 64.

<sup>26</sup>Barry, "The Part of the Folk Singer in the Making of Folk Balladry," 72.

<sup>27</sup>Entwhistle, European Balladry, 72.

## Chapter V

<sup>1</sup>Gummere, The Popular Ballad, 45.

<sup>2</sup>Shepard, The Broadside Ballad, 38.

<sup>3</sup>Bowra, Primitive Song, 38-42.

<sup>4</sup>Leach, "Folksong and Ballad--A New Emphasis," 206.

<sup>5</sup>Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 152.

<sup>6</sup>Coulton, Medieval Panorama, 92.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>8</sup>Muir, Living With Ballads, 77.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>11</sup>Coulton, Life in the Middle Ages, I, 91.

<sup>12</sup>Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion, Ch. I.

<sup>13</sup>Spence, Myth and Ritual in Dance, Game and Rhyme, 25.

<sup>14</sup>Muir, Living With Ballads, 73.





<sup>15</sup>Coulton, Medieval Panorama, 597-98. From this liturgical drama was evolved later a whole set of miracle plays, the so-called "Harrowing of Hell."

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 608.

<sup>18</sup>Brown, ed., English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century, xi.

<sup>19</sup>Spence, Myth and Ritual, 115-16.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 142.

<sup>21</sup>Greene, ed., English Carols, 7.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>23</sup>Kidson and Neal, English Folksong and Dance, 102.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 112.

<sup>25</sup>Alford, Introduction to English Folklore, 9. The ritual ship-on-wheels may throw some light on the MHG. romance of Moriz von Craon. The romance contains an unexplained digression dealing with such a land ship on which the hero travels across France. But there is little ritualistic significance left in this ship, which has a stable for horses camouflaged underneath. But the silliness of Moriz as Ship's Captain, and the general levity involved in ship-board parties and shenanigans may be traceable to ritual. Interestingly, the ship is dismantled after its last voyage, and pieces are given to the crowd as souvenirs, much, perhaps, as the body of Dionysus is dismembered, and the parts scattered over the land to encourage fertility.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>27</sup>[Medieval] "man was at least biologically nearer to that unconscious wholeness which primitive man enjoys in larger measure, and the wild animal possesses to perfection." Jung, The Basic Works, 90.

<sup>28</sup>Leach, ed., The Ballad Book, 38.

<sup>29</sup>Rank, The Myth of the Birth of the Hero, 9.

<sup>30</sup>Henderson, The Ballad in Literature, 24.



<sup>31</sup>Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 144.

<sup>32</sup>"Primitive man by no means lacks the ability to grasp the empirical differences of things. But in his conception of nature and life all these differences are obliterated by a stronger feeling: the deep conviction of a fundamental and indelible solidarity of life that bridges over the multiplicity and variety of its single forms." (Cassirer, An Essay on Man, 82) Malinowsky (in Myth in Primitive Psychology, 388) says ". . . it is just that solidarity of which Cassirer writes, that makes ritual an inevitable act associated with the natural actions of the primitive, associated with the seasons and with food gathering of any kind, from which myth grows as a dynamic and dramatic representation of the ritualistic action."

<sup>33</sup>Muir, Living With Ballads, 106. Jung (in The Basic Works) elaborates Mrs. Muir's statement: "We have. . . two kinds of thinking; directed thinking and dreaming or fantasy thinking. The former operates with speech elements for the purpose of communication, and is difficult and exhausting; the latter is effortless, working as it were spontaneously, with the contents ready to hand, and guided by unconscious motives." 22 In this latter kind of thinking, "the most heterogeneous things are brought together regardless of the actual conditions, and a world of impossibilities takes the place of reality." 25 We apprehend archetypal images when, "through fantasy thinking, directed thinking is brought beneath the oldest layers of the human mind, long buried beneath the threshold of consciousness." 33

<sup>34</sup>There are others of course. In "Sir Lionel" (18) there are a giant and a boar. "Young Ronald" (304) has a six-headed giant. "King Henry" (32) and "Kempy Kay" (33) have monstrous ladies. A burlow beanie or Billie Blin, a beneficent household deity common to much folklore is found in "King Arthur and King Cornwall" (30). Fire-breathing fiends and other monsters appear chiefly in ballads which have connections with romance.

<sup>35</sup>A term used by Professor Gummere and others to describe the peculiar character of the ballad ghost (the <sup>present</sup> ~~past~~ participle of F. revenir).

<sup>36</sup>Fiske, Myth and Myth Makers, 57.

<sup>37</sup>Literary treatment, notably that of Shakespeare, has been responsible for conventional notions of the fairy.

<sup>38</sup>Wimberly, Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads, 175.





<sup>39</sup>In the ballads one often discovers what Wimberly calls the "triad of cocks," composed of a black (red), a brown (gray), and a white cock. The white cock always crows last, just as it is always the white horse which arrives at its destination. Perhaps there is some remembrance of the sacredness of the color white involved.

<sup>40</sup>In "Gil Brenton" (5) there is a husband who solicits the aid of magic sheets, blankets and pillows to find out whether his wife is a maiden. "The Boy and the Mantle" (29) has a similar theme. The hero, as well as the heroine, may occasionally have to do with benevolent magic, as in "Tam Lin" (39).

<sup>41</sup>Wimberly, Folklore, 74.

<sup>42</sup>Henry Bett (in English Myths and Traditions, 20) believes that the "scarcity of reference to the personal names of fairies connects with the widespread belief in the magical power that belongs to a name."

<sup>43</sup>Mrs. Muir (in Living With Ballads, 33) sees a similar attitude of the early listener to ballads to that of children in their games: "Suspension of disbelief is not the proper phrase to describe this acceptance which characterizes. . .all audiences who listen to oral poetry. Without it, I do not believe that oral tradition could long survive. The spoken word, or the sung word, seems to penetrate more immediately, more directly, into the underworld of feeling than the word looked at on a printed page."

<sup>44</sup>Mrs. Muir makes a suggestion about Homer which may apply to the stock figures and commonplaces in the ballads: "Whenever a ritual action rears, like a sacrifice to the gods, the same lines are used time and again in the same order, with the same particularized details." (Living With Ballads, 67) Perhaps ritual had a formal as well as a thematic effect on the ballads. To a very large extent both ballad texts and ballad tunes are formulaic. There are commonplaces both in musical phrase and textual line, there is refrain, much repetition, and a good deal of dialogue, all of which may suggest "an origin in dramatic improvisation" (Jones, "Commonplace and Memorization in the Oral Tradition of the English and Scottish Popular Ballads," 97). Of course it is really only the couplet form of the ballad which lends itself to this possibility, and comparatively few of the remaining ballads are in this form. If it could be established that the quatrain ballad developed out of the couplet ballad (which is doubtful), there would be good reason to connect the present form of the ballad with some bygone ritual dance or song. As usual the obstacle is the lack of manuscript evidence concerning the earliest ballads.



<sup>45</sup>Solar mythology and the idea of the old and new king are sometimes thought to be about equivalent as euphemistic expressions of more sinister concepts. But the euphemism (if such it is) is only a way of talking about something important in the human mind.

<sup>46</sup>Such as Spence, Myth and Ritual.

<sup>47</sup>Kittredge and Sargent, eds., The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 255.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 255.

<sup>49</sup>Spence, Myth and Ritual, 37.

<sup>50</sup>Simeone (in "The May Games and the Robin Hood Legend," 267) finds a significant allusion to Robin Hood in connection with St. George in 1473, "when John Paston complained that his servant William Wood, who for three years previous had played Robin Hood and St. George, had left him." The association of these two characters, both of ritual origin, is made more significant by the fact that, like St. George, Robin Hood was the main character in several plays based on the stories of ballads. These include Robin Hood and the Knight (based on "Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne" 118), Robin Hood and the Friar ("Robin Hood and the Curtal Friar," 123) and Robin Hood and the Potter (from the ballad of the same title, 121).

Gummere, quoting from Child, notes an interesting association of "The Twa Brothers" (49) with the ritual St. George plays. An "Edward" variety of "The Twa Brothers" was "sung after a St. George play regularly acted on All Souls Day at a village a few miles from Chester. . . . The play was introduced by a song. . . and followed by two songs of which this is the last, the whole dramatic company singing." (The Popular Ballad, 122-23)

<sup>51</sup>Sidgwick, ed., Popular Ballads of the Olden Time, xxi.

<sup>52</sup>Simeone, "The May Games and the Robin Hood Legend," 268.

<sup>53</sup>Spence, Myth and Ritual, 37.

<sup>54</sup>Kittredge and Sargent, eds., The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 302.

<sup>55</sup>Spence, Myth and Ritual, 37.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 37.







<sup>57</sup>Jung (in The Basic Works, 169) tells how "the game of ball with the child [as the ball] is the motif of some secret rite which always has to do with child sacrifice." The ball game, as well as the sacrifice-motif, is an integral part of "Sir Hugh." Spence (in Myth and Ritual, 20) considers the genealogy of the game of ball. He thinks it has to do with "a myth connected with the ancient religion of Persia, in which Ormuzd or Ahura Mazda, the beneficent creator of light, carries on an increasing strife with Ahriman, the principle of light and darkness. In some of its reclusions, this dualistic myth assumes the character of an everlasting game of ball, in which the fortunes of the universe are tossed, now into light, now into shadow, by the contending powers, and some authorities have not failed to discern in this god-like strife the prototype of all those ball games which necessitate propulsion from one side to another of a fixed pair of boundaries." Other "Ball" ballads include "The Cruel Mother" (20), "The Two Brothers" (49), "Tam Lin" (39), "Queen Elanor's Confession" (156), "Child Waters" (63), "Bonny Baby Livingstone" (222) and "The Bitter Withy."

<sup>58</sup>Hodgart, The Ballads, 127.

<sup>59</sup>Child, The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, III, 410.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 410.

<sup>61</sup>Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition, 12.

## Chapter VI

<sup>1</sup>Bronson, The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads, x.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., x.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., x-xi.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., xi.

<sup>5</sup>Greenway, "The Flight of the Gray Goose: Literary Symbolism in the Traditional Ballad," 166.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 167.



<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 174.

<sup>9</sup>Fiedler, "Archetype and Signature," 462.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 471.

<sup>11</sup>Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, 1.

<sup>12</sup>Hodgart (in The Ballads, 32-33) sees in the interspersal of "the bare recital of tragic events with a rich pattern of flowers and trees," "the quenching of human life ironically contrasted with the continuity of natural life."

<sup>13</sup>Some other ballads which contain the greenwood symbol are: "Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight" (4); "Gil Brenton" (5); "Child Maurice" (83); "Jellon Grame" (90); "Brown Robin" (97); "Johnie Scot" (99); "Willie o Douglas Dale" (101); "Willie and Earl Richard's Daughter" (102); "Rose the Red and White Lily" (103); "The Kitchie Boy" (252); "Alison and Willie" (256) and "John Thomson and the Turk" (266).

<sup>14</sup>Spence, Myth and Ritual, 146.

<sup>15</sup>Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns, 126. My italics.

<sup>16</sup>Rank, The Myth of the Birth of the Hero, 77.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 61. There are, of course, other versions of the monomyth which vary in this or that detail, but are substantially the same in their broad outlines.

<sup>19</sup>"Somewhere. . .there is a prototype or primordial image of the mother that is pre-existent and supraordinate to all phenomena in which the 'maternal' in the broadest sense of the term is manifest." Jung, The Collected Works, 328.

<sup>20</sup>My count.

<sup>21</sup>Entwhistle, European Balladry, 27.

<sup>22</sup>Hodgart, The Ballads, 28. Steenstrup compares this narrative technique to the dramatic layout of the Bayeux Tapestry, which leads the eye from well-defined scene to scene.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 28.





<sup>24</sup>Chambers (in English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages, 174) says (of incremental repetition): "There is a stern economy here in the reduction of the unessential to a formula."

<sup>25</sup>The distinction between "early" and "late" ballads is, in a sense, an artificial one. The essential condition for a ballad to retain its characteristic qualities, is that it must be kept in the oral tradition. And, of course, ballads which are "later" chronologically may not have gotten out of oral tradition, while relatively earlier ones may have. Once out of oral tradition, whether chronologically early or late, ballads par excellence tend to disappear. The distinction between early and late in balladry, then, is used here for convenience, the adjective "late" being applied, in a somewhat derogatory fashion, to those ballads which are the worse for having been subjected to "artistic" influences.

<sup>26</sup>Leach, The Ballad Book, 38.

<sup>27</sup>Barry, "The Part of the Folk Singer in the Making of Folk Balladry," 66.

<sup>28</sup>Kittredge and Sargent, eds., The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 26.

## Conclusion

<sup>1</sup>Gerould, "The Making of the Ballads," 15.



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